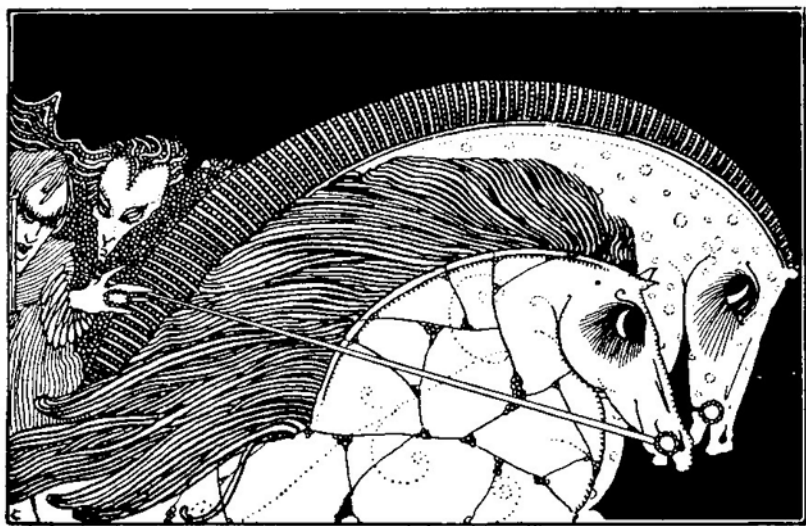


The Fellowship of Four

Dave Morris



1: THE WIZARD'S TALE

I am falling!

...Plunging out of the sky like a stone. None of my spells can save me now. For all my knowledge and cunning, I am helpless. Last night I learned that the whole world was in jeopardy and launched myself on this mad quest to save it. Alas, the arrogance of youth! Now I cannot even save myself. I can only wait through a long moment until the ground comes rushing up and smashes my bones like a giant's fist.

With my cloak snapping about me, I go tumbling down towards a forest which, even from this altitude, spreads as far as the western horizon. From the east the dawn rises in streaks of burgundy and bright gold, glittering above the grey-green pane of the sea and fading into the lavender gloom of the sky.

Faustus flaps above me, caught and blinded by a shaft of sunlight like a butterfly on a pin. I say 'above', but one of the more remarkable features of my predicament is that up and down have ceased to have any meaning. At this time, with gravity my most deadly foe and surely soon to be my executioner, I am oddly free of any sensation of weight. The only force I can feel is the tug of my cloak, whose snapping folds, caught up by the rush of winds as I fall, seem to be striving vainly to hold me aloft.

I am afforded the leisure to contemplate all this thanks to the Spell of the Extended Instant, a meditational cantrip which I invoked as I began my descent. It protracts the seconds, so that in these last moments of life I can drink in details that I might otherwise never have noted. In reality it may take no more than a dozen heartbeats for me to drop out of the heavens and crash to my death between the black tree-trunks, but owing to the cantrip that time will seem like an hour.

Such a curiosity – to be caught between sky and land,

between mortal panic and languid reverie. I let my thoughts stray where they will and, perhaps inevitably, they return to the events of just a few hours ago. How could I have guessed then that they were to be the last few hours of my life..?

By reason of the storms that had been wuthering in off the Sea of Claws and turning the coastal road into a treacherous mire, I was late in answering my mentor's summons to his manse at Truillon. In all candour, this was not the only reason for delay. I had also suffered embroilment in a card game at an inn along the route. Not for nothing am I known as Fortunate the Daring; I had made several heroic sorties along the borders of fiscal calamity, and neither honour nor the slackness of my purse would allow me to abandon the game until I had brought it to a satisfactory conclusion.

Approaching Truillon under a sky of charcoal grey, I hoped that the Archimage Matholem would not enquire too rigorously after my tardiness. I had attracted his disapproval in the past for what he perceived as my tendency to feckless extravagance. Another, less old-fashioned, interpretation of my character favoured me instead with the qualities of audacity, cunning and verve. But the Archimage was staunch in his opinions, and not to be gainsaid by even the most talented of his students.

I steered my horse down the shingle and rode along the edge of the sea until I was level with Truillon, a hunched island out among the waves. Lights glimmered from the manse's mullioned windows, scattered into a watery blur by the wind-driven spray.

Putting a finger-bone whistle to my lips, I sent a sharp note out over the water. There was a moment when the wind seemed to hold its breath. Then, as a tremor shook the pebbles of the beach and my horse stirred restively, a vast column of basalt sucked itself out of the sand and thrust slowly up from the surf. I urged the horse forward

on to this platform as another rose up just ahead of it, the sheer stone flanks sliding past each other with a gritty rasp. And so we progressed on across the water to Truillon, basalt pistons rising ahead and then sinking back into the sea-bed as we passed.

Dismounting to lead my horse up the steep path to the manse, I passed the gate-house and was met in the cramped courtyard by Dabarracus, the Archimage's steward. He stood shivering in the drizzle, an oil-skin wrapped around his scrawny frame, and blinked at me in the light of a heavy iron lantern.

'Master Fortunato—' he began.

I handed him the reins. 'Dabarracus,' I said, 'since the Archimage may have much to say to me, perhaps you should defer from reporting my arrival until I have had a chance to take supper.'

'But Master...'

'Also, be so good as to see to Bellerophon's stabling,' I called back over my shoulder. 'I noticed him favouring his left foreleg somewhat as we came across the causeway. He may have a pebble under his shoe.'

I was ensconced in the Great Hall with a loaf of fennel-bread and a deep bowl of broth by the time Dabarracus returned from the stables. Outside, with the onset of evening, the wind had risen. I listened to it shriek around the walls and come howling down the chimney to churn the red flames in the massive hearth. Feeling the warmth, my sorcerer's familiar, the little pipistrelle Faustus, had crept out of my sleeve and now crouched under his leathery wings at the edge of the bowl to lap at the soup.

'Ah, Dabarracus,' I said, 'the Hall is very quiet tonight. Where are the other adepts? Surely they have not all taken themselves to their chambers so early in the evening. Are they with the Archimage, perhaps, engaged in some intricate enchantment? Or as yet unarrived, delayed by these unconscionable storms?'

'Master Fortunato, they have gone. The Archimage and all his adepts, save for you. They left almost a week ago.'

'They left without me? I find this difficult to credit. Surely, Dabarracus, there is some detail you have overlooked?'

Dabarracus shook his head. 'The Archimage led the adepts in a lengthy evocation. This was six days ago, on a night brimming with rain and gales, with waves crashing high up the rocks. As the last notes of the chanting fell away, so the wind died too, and a clattering of hooves was heard on the cobblestones outside. I took my lantern to look, and there in the courtyard waited seven briny steeds. They were short-legged and thickset, like highland ponies, with wet shaggy coats and manes like kelp. Each was already harnessed ready for a journey, with bridles of a material which resembled fish-scales decorated with mother-of-pearl, and their saddles were the shaped shells of giant crabs.'

'Extraordinary.'

'The Archimage led the adepts down,' Dabarracus went on, 'and they mounted and made ready to ride out on those ferly mares. It was only then that I noticed the creatures' burning green eyes.'

'Surely these steeds were of sorcerous origin!'

'This is my own theory,' agreed Dabarracus. 'And I can cite further evidence: after riding down to the sea's edge, the Archimage and his students set out due west directly across the water, the beasts' hooves by some means traversing the waves as a normal steed travels on land.'

I ruminated on all this. The summoning of such marvellous horses from out of the ocean depths would not have been any easy matter. Evidently the reason for the summons to Truillon was direr than I had supposed. For all that, I still found myself perplexed that Archimage Matholem had not chosen to wait for my arrival, and I divulged my confusion to Dabarracus.

'I believe they undertook a quest of some considerable

urgency,' he replied. 'Delay may have been impractical.'

'All the more reason to wait for the foremost of the adepts!' I cried, clouting the table for emphasis. 'The Archimage cannot have failed to note my absence. Did he make no reference to this before setting out?'

Dabarracus peered at his feet and shifted uncomfortably. 'He uttered a statement that was wanting in clarity, Master Fortunato. The words "ne'er-do-well" and "dissipated scapegrace" may have been used.'

'And did he leave no specific instructions for me on my arrival?' I asked with a frown.

'He did, Master Fortunato — a most explicit instruction, the gist of which seemed to be an anatomical impossibility. I believe it was by way of being sheer invective, and not to be interpreted literally.'

I dismissed Dabarracus and made my way up to the tower room where my master stored the paraphernalia of our art. Naturally my first thought was to consult the Orb of Uncanny Visioning, but it seemed that Matholem had taken that useful device with him on his journey. The Orb being a thing of some fragility, and very difficult to replace, this discovery reinforced my concern.

After a few minutes more spent searching the work-room, I came across a Cerascopic Plaque and gave a cry of faint satisfaction. Though unable to communicate with Matholem and the others, I could at least derive an image of their present location. I warmed the Plaque's lead covers over a candle and pressed these down on to its wax surface, lifting them a moment later to study the image thus formed. A series of incised lines now showed on the wax, which could be made out with some effort as a picture showing a bearded old man in cabbalistic robes struggling through a deep forest. Matholem, assuredly — though the engraving showed his stubborn old face in a rather flattering light. Other figures were also depicted, and I thought to see a resemblance to Heinrich, Sebastian, Nicola and others of the adepts.

Next I consulted a number of charts. If they had indeed set out due west across the sea, as Dabarracus had said, and allowing for the aquestrians' pace as being similar to terrestrial horses ... I did some rapid calculations on my fingers. That would place Matholem and the others more than a hundred leagues away, clear across the Tristesse Bay and deep in the forest of Athelorn. This tallied with the image that had appeared on the Cerascopic Plaque. I scanned the maps again, looking for some clue as to their eventual destination, but beyond the forests that swathed the eastern edge of Athelorn there was only a wide plain stretching to a range of mountains at the top margin of the map. Even these jottings were qualified by a question mark and the proviso '*Terra Incognita*'.

I next examined the difficulties involved in pursuing the others. Passage directly across the Tristesse Bay could be immediately ruled out. I had no knowledge of the means to summon an aquestrian mount of my own, and I would never find any captain willing to take his ship through uncharted waters in such evil weather. If I took the route north by land then –assuming I could avoid the footpads of Emerais, the ghosts of Northmoor, and the avalanches of Black Fire Pass – I might hope to reach the fringes of the Ourn delta within three weeks. This is where the dun slough of the River Ourn debouches into the northern cleft of Tristesse Bay, in the process forming a sour salt marsh inhabited by carnivorous lizards. Crossing that by raft might reasonably be expected to take another ten days or so...

I glanced across to the western maps. In such a period, Matholem and the adepts could have journeyed right off the edge of the world. I shook my head; another form of transport would have to be found.

It was time to set that aside for the nonce, as the first priority was surely to discover the nature of the Archimage's quest. To this end, I mixed euphrasy, kex, mandrake and mistletoe in a golden bowl and set this to

smouldering, then burnt a measure of screech-owl's blood on it to form a residue with which I painted out a closed spiral on the floor. Five umber candles completed the design. Kneeling, with the Book of King Solomon open in front of me, I performed the prescribed cadenza and waited.

Wind surged in off the sea and rattled raindrops against the window panes. Surf broke with a roar against the rocks.

The five wicks glowed and caught alight, and a column of reddish haze was now visible within the confines of the spiral. I could feel a waft of frowsty heat on my cheek, as though from a great furnace which only my magic shielded me against. After a moment, a figure came into focus inside the glowing column. It was a dry ashen husk with cinders for eyes, hanging in the air and turning slowly like a corpse on a gibbet.

'Mordaciter,' I said to the being, 'by my art I have brought you from the Calid Regions to submit to my interrogation.'

Mordaciter demurred for the sake of his dignity. 'I shall endeavour to enlighten you,' he conceded after a moment.

'My master, the Archimage Matholem, has departed his manse along with six of his seven adepts. Certain aspects of the excursion are suggestive of extreme urgency. Can you clarify the matter?'

'Certainly. Matholem seeks to prevent the awakening of the demon Kyrax, known variously to the sages of ancient times as the White Lord, Blizzard Flame, and He Who Descends From The Storm.'

'The Archimage seems to consider this venture to be of considerable importance,' I ventured. 'He departed without waiting for—'

Mordaciter made an impatient gesture, his weightless limbs drifting slowly as though stirred by currents of hot air. 'Naturally. Should Matholem fail, the consequences would be severe. It would entail the end of the mortal world, for one thing.'

I cocked my eyebrows at this. 'Is this an example of your

infernally wit, Mordaciter? I take the remark to be in the manner of shrill hyperbole.'

'Not at all,' replied the demon in his sere voice. 'I speak the literal truth; your world will be overrun by stark Chaos if Kyrax is restored to life.'

'Who is this Kyrax?' I said. 'A demon of some kind? I do not know of him.'

'His story ended long ago. He was an entity of insensate malice who took the form of a giant white wolf or dragon. When, his power having waxed full, he sought to bring the Fimbulwinter upon the world, he was opposed by the Savants of the Hidden City. Two of the Savants were scathed by Kyrax's magic, but the third brought him to battle in the skies above the northern rim of the world. There, according to distant remembrance, they fought for seven nights and days until the Savant finally was able to pierce Kyrax's breast with a lance of light. Twisting and turning, the demon fell out of the sky into a frozen lake atop Mount Anger. Subsequently, the surviving Savant erected an adamantine chamber around the cadaver's heart.'

'If the demon was slain, what was the purpose of this chamber?'

'It was to contain Kyrax's essence and prevent his resurrection – a precaution made necessary by reason of Kyrax's eminence as the regatherer of lost energies.'

After mulling over all this, I continued with my inquiry: 'How is it that the world is now threatened with Kyrax's return, after his long interval of quiescence? And how did my master learn of it?'

'After Kyrax's destruction,' went the dry whisper of Mordaciter's voice, 'a shadowy creature almost immediately began to corporify from the black ichor of his heart. The Savant saw that this torpid revenant would eventually draw sufficient malignance into itself for the demon's vital force to return. The adamantine chamber sealed it away just as a cyst encloses an infection. The

Savant closed the chamber with three chains, two of which have now become weakened by the actions of Kyrax's worshippers who have maintained a small but persistent presence in the world. Each tiny act of their depravity has eroded the chains' links. The third chain was to have been sundered when one of Kyrax's followers assassinated Matholem, but the Archimage managed to fend off the attack. Thereupon, consulting his speculum, he learned the truth and at once convened his students.'

'An attempt on the master's life..?' I gasped. 'Why did I not hear of this?'

Mordaciter spoke with insouciance. 'I am not privy to Matholem's innermost thoughts. It may have been connected with the fact that, at the time of his outset from the manse, you were in the taproom of the Green Cheese Inn, melding a straight flush in a game of taroc and calling for a scone of ale—'

'Where are Matholem and the others now?' I asked sharply.

'In the uncharted forest of north-eastern Athelorn, currently battling with were-efts. They are somewhat behind Kyrax's emissaries, who are led by an orc witch named Ghashlug and who are also heading for Mount Anger.'

'I must join them. How can I do so?'

'Why not wait until Kyrax is free and the Fimbulwinter is unleashed on the world?' suggested Mordaciter. 'Then the seas will freeze over and it will be possible to walk across the Tristesse Bay to Athelorn.'

'That will be too late,' I objected. 'My intention is to help prevent Kyrax's resurgence. It falls to you to recommend a much more expeditious plan.'

'There are a variety of methods,' said Mordaciter after seeming to ponder. 'As an example chosen at random, you could tender me your soul, in exchange for which I would grant you the power of flight, along with riches, comfort, and the avid ministrations of—'

'You snide demon. I see I shall get nothing more of value from you. Begone; return to your own world.'

Mordaciter flickered away, leaving only the thick waxy smoke of the five extinguished candles.

I descended from the tower and began preparations for the journey. First, a change of clothes. I chose breeches of black and scarlet brocade, figured with a foliate motif in gold. My doublet was of red velvet, gilt-bordered and with long virid slashes along the sleeves. I tied a wide green sash about my waist and secured this with an ornamental clasp of bloodstone set in silver. A similar medallion set off the oyster-grey silk lining of my collar. My boots of creased black leather were fastened with lilaceous buckles, and an asymmetric brimmed hat adorned with a long plume of basilicock feathers completed the outfit.

In the armoury I found the sword known as 'the Whisper of Mortality'. Its sharp dark blade, not unmistakably of earthly metal, held a lustreless glim: one theory held it to be shee-copper with an admixture of starlight and shadow. The curious grey hilt felt smooth and chilly in my hand, like a long pebble shaped by the sea. I set the sword at my waist, and also put a slim dagger inside my boot. Though I count myself only mediocre in the art of fencing, sometimes the mere display of a weapon is enough to deter trouble, and on a long journey I would have need of some resource more constant than an expendable stock of spells.

This last thought took me to the library, where I pored over a dozen volumes making my selection. I naturally have access at all times to a full range of cantrips, but more cogent magic is difficult to hold in mind and has to be impressed into memory at the onset of a venture. I studied for some hours and finally succeeded in encompassing nine medium-strength spells of elemental magic, reasoning that such versatility was better than equipping myself with only one or two spells of the stronger Thaumaturgic or Theurgic phyla. I rose from my books reeling as though from a strong draught of brandy- wine, the occult syllables still

reverberating inside my head like echoes in a bell.

Thus armed, I returned up the winding steps to the work-room. Now I was ready to set out. It only remained to find a mode of travelling that would bring me to the others in time.

The corners of the work-room were impacted with a clutter of beakers, alembics, thuribles, retorts, periapts, astrolabes, lenses and other spagyric adjuncts. A cloud of dust rose, drawing a niggling cough from my lungs as I searched. In due course, my gaze attracted by a faint glow, I cleared aside the cobwebs to uncover a large sylpharium, the glass of its front tinted lavender with age. The light came from within this tank, and could now be identified as flowing from a number of distinct sources. A yellowing label attached to the stand described the contents as '*Lucifugous Lunescules (9)*'. I used a cloth to wipe away the dust.

The lunescules proved to be small imps about a span in height. Each emitted a halo of illumination, so that they moved like luminous silhouettes behind the thick glass of the sylpharium. By squinting, it was possible to discern the venation of their membraneous wings and the details of each tiny face.

I addressed as the leader one who was particularized by haughty pinched features and a slight topaz glint to his nimbus. After a brief summary of events, I explained my needs to him. 'I require transvection across the Tristesse Bay. If you and your fellows can accomplish this, you shall thereby secure your freedom.'

'Consider,' said the lunescule, speaking as though indifferent to the offer: 'we are delicate creatures. Our charms are refined; our preferences tend towards elegance and ease. We are not beasts of burden, to carry a mulish mortal aloft into the skies, and in fact are content to remain where we are.'

'I have here an insecticidal liquid. Shall I admit the fumes into your tank, to see how this affects the prevailing

atmosphere of ease and contentment?’

There came a rapid buzz of small voices. ‘A new consensus has been reached,’ announced the lunescale after a moment. ‘We are now ready to carry you where you wish to go.’

After first taking the precaution of binding them to their promise with a forcible oath, I opened the tank and allowed them to float free. They swirled around me in the dusty air, trailing after-images of spangling light. I was disappointed by their efforts to raise me into the air, however. Their dainty touch was barely enough to pluck up a fold from my garments, much less support my own weight.

I presented my qualms to the leader, who responded with a hasty reassurance. ‘Our efforts indeed give the appearance of lacking efficiency,’ he explained, ‘but this is easily remedied. By nature, we lunescales are habitants of the rarefied upper atmosphere. It is your current close proximity with the coarse weft of the mundane world that is acting to nullify our exertions.’

I considered this. ‘I am open to your suggestions,’ I told the lunescale.

At the lunescale’s direction, I summoned Dabarracus and two servants and had them accompany me to the roof with a long ladder. The lunescales flew up the steps ahead of us, darting to and fro in eager anticipation of their freedom.

We stepped out through the dormer window of Heinrich’s garret on to the gutter of the roof. Needles of icy rain came with each gust of the wind, spitting against the tiles. Dabarracus handed me a heavy travelling-cloak of camlet with a ruff of squirrel-fur. I settled Faustus into the wide sleeve and watched as the servants steadied the ladder against one of the high chimney stacks. If they were surprised to be raising a ladder into nothingness in the middle of the night, they gave no sign of it. Many of the Archimage’s retainers are men of remarkable aplomb.

Even with three men supporting it, the ladder swayed

alarmingly under my weight. Three-quarters of the way to the top, my nerve began to give out. I clung to the ladder as an unusually strong blast of wind shook it back and forth. Faustus gave a squeak and peeked out of my sleeve, no doubt wary of being caught into the folds of the cloak should I fall. This seemed to betoken a lack of confidence that did little for my courage.

'Perhaps this will suffice,' I said to the lunscales through sagging jaw.

They tested their grip on my cloak. I felt a certain force upwards this time, but still not enough to impel me into the sky.

'You must proceed,' decided the leader. 'Up, to the summit of the ladder!'

By some means I succeeded in dragging myself to the topmost rung. My limbs now shook with fear. An ill-advised glance downwards showed me a trio of dubious faces at the bottom of the ladder. Beyond them, the wall dropped down to merge with the rocks of the island, which in turn descended in sharp sheer lines towards crashing spume and cold black waves. I jerked my gaze up towards the sky, where vast clouds swung like an iris across the lamp of the moon.

'Now, now!' I cried. 'Bear me up before I slip.'

'It is still not enough,' replied the lunscales. 'You must take one further step.'

'Recall your oath,' I said by way of certification. 'You must carry me across the sea to Athelorn.'

'We have so sworn. Now, let go the ladder. You must be free of contact with all earthly things for our efforts to prevail.'

I closed my eyes, uttered a collective prayer to all the divinities I know of, and launched myself into space.

A moment of stomach-wrenching helplessness ensued, and then I suddenly felt an upward tug lifting me up away from the reefs. Risking a glance, I saw that the lunscales were now able to support me. We soared up until I could

see the whole of Truillon like a model laid out beneath. I had the lunscales perform a triumphal circuit of the manse, if for no other reason than to relish the dumbfoundment of Dabarracus and the servants, and then urged them westwards. In my sleeve, now content, Faustus snuggled back for a long journey.

Hours passed. The sight of the sea, sliding past far below and the enormous expanse of the night sky at last induced a kind of catalepsy. This, in turn, gave way to sleep.

I woke to a voice like an insect buzzing in my ear. My joints were stiff with cold. A weak glint of daylight cracked the horizon; below was the dark expanse of a forest. For a moment it was impossible for my senses to encompass the situation. Then memory returned.

'We have arrived,' announced the chief lunscale. 'Behold the continent of Athelorn. Now we depart to enjoy our emancipation.'

'But wait,' I said in sudden alarm. 'First you must set me down on firm land.'

The lunscales released their grip and began to fall away, up into the lightening sky. 'You should have formulated your wishes more explicitly,' chided their spokesman. 'Already the sun is rising. We are liable to evanesce in daylight, and now must hurry to the over-world. Farewell.'

They dwindled and were lost to view like stars in the dawn.

And so it is that I, now with all the weight of the mundane world to suck me down, plummet towards an unpromising destiny on the forest floor far below...

2: THE ELF'S TALE

'I am Luck.'

This is the first thing he says as he starts to come round. I found him earlier, at sunrise, lying in a snowdrift. Actually, winter having just recently gone north again for the year, it is not so much a snowdrift as a pile of wet rotting leaves covered by a thin shell of ice. Nearby are a lot of broken twigs and even a whole branch, shattered clean off a dead bough, so it looks obvious that he has fallen out of the sky and it is only last year's leaves that saved his life.

It is close to the old bridge over the stream which runs into the pond where the old tench hides. I run to the stream and collect some water in my cupped hands. As I do this, I notice the tench looking up at me from under the deep stones over by the pond, an olive-green flicker in the murk. Tut-tut, tench; one day I will tickle you up from that pond, but not today. I go back and hold the water to his lips, and he gives a groan at first because it is ice-cold, but then he starts to drink. Mortals are like tenches, I am thinking. Very hard to kill.

Later on Luck is feeling much better, though still obviously dazed. He sits up and watches me build a small fire, but the wood is damp and it gives off more smoke than heat. I offer him an acorn cup and he, cracking a smile, asks if I know where there's a giant tree or is it that I've somehow shrunk him in size? I just tell him it's an acorn cup and to drink it. He does, and afterwards he falls asleep for a while. I don't have anything much to do so I sit there tending the fire, listening to it hiss and spit in the cold air.

'You're an elf,' he says when he wakes up.

There doesn't seem any need to say anything in answer to this, so I just sit looking through the fire-smoke at him. His sword is lying across my lap now. I thought I recognized

it straight away, and after a closer look I'm sure. It is the sword Woe, its blade cut by gallows goblins from the wing case of a giant night-zatch, the pommel of polished spider's bone.

'You may have saved my life,' Luck goes on, obviously wanting to break the silence because he's nervous.

'Me and a branch and some dead leaves,' I say, nodding.

I see him stretching as he sits up, trying to tell if there are any broken bones. Of course he is covered with scratches from the fall through the treetops, and now I notice that his ankle is swollen. He winces and scoops up a handful of earth and rubs it on to himself while reciting something in a sing-song voice. He must have used some kind of crude elemental magic, because the cuts close up and the swelling starts to go down immediately.

'If there's any way I can repay you,' he starts to say, and then his voice trails off because he's noticed I have the sword.

I hold it up. 'You already have,' I tell him:

'Not like that. I mean some kind of favour. I need that sword; let me pay you back some other way.'

I have to shake my head, as this is what mortals do to say no. 'There's the Principle of Defrayal to consider. You get a life, I get a magic sword. Now we're even – nobody owes anybody anything.'

'But I could offer you friendship instead.' He stops, realizing now that I'm not going to be swayed, and changes the subject. 'Aren't you curious to know how I got here?'

I give a shrug. 'You fell out of the air.' This prompts a baffled look so I go on: 'I know you are a sorcerer, mortal. I saw your familiar.' Talking to mortals can be almost painful.

The bat is looking out from his cuff, squinting in the bone-brittle daylight. He strokes it with his forefinger, causing it to bare its tiny white teeth in what I suppose is an expression of pleasure, and tells me that it too is called Luck, only this time using a different word from before.

'I had to get sylphs to fly me across the Bay,' says Luck. 'All the way across? From the eastern continent?' I ask, interest piqued now despite myself, mainly since I know nothing whatsoever about the land to the east.

'Since last night.' He leans forward, looking very earnest with the red flush from the heat of the fire on his otherwise pale cheeks. 'I'm trying to find my mentor, who has come here with other adepts of our Order. They've sworn to prevent the reawakening of the demon Kyrax, who has been lying dormant in a frozen lake since his shending by a Savant of the Hidden City.'

He falls silent but goes on looking at me, and I remember now that this is what humans do when they are waiting for an immediate reply. I don't have one, so I just say, 'I haven't seen them' and go on stirring the fire with a twig.

'At last information, they were somewhere in this forest. We must look for them.' Luck gets to his feet. His magic must be quite good for a mortal's, because the ankle doesn't give him any trouble. I start to get engrossed in my new acquisition, admiring the colourless wine-dark sweep of the blade and the equally uncoloured, but lighter, silvery grey, sheen of the handle, until I notice that Luck hasn't moved off; he seems to be waiting for something. I look up.

'Well,' he says, 'are you coming?'

I think about this for longer than I need to, since at first it strikes me as a trick question. 'No,' I say after a while.

'You must. Don't you understand, you vapid elf? Is your head full of oak-galls? Didn't you hear what I just said? If Kyrax is revived, it will mean the Fimbulwinter. The end of the world.'

I jump to my feet, bristling at the insults, but cannot bring myself to strike at Luck, who is just a poor dumb mortal after all. Also, who knows what bad luck I might become liable to by saving his life in the morning only to take it away from him in the afternoon? His story is tedious even if true, but I am too satisfied with the sword he has

given me not to do anything.

'You're going to help?' says Luck, softer now, hopefully, as he sees me hesitate.

I kick mud and leaf-mould on to the fire. 'I'll show you the path out of the forest,' I say by way of compromise.

'And what about the world?'

'Save it if you want. Myself, I'm going to go hunting tomorrow.'

Gathering my things, I find an old cudgel of ivy-wood, stout and with a whiff of magic, that has done me good service in the past. Having no need of it now with Woe at my belt, I give it to Luck, whose sour smile as he accepts it betrays little grace.

'My name is Eildonas of Hulda Hoo,' I tell him as we walk.

'I take you to be one of the grey elves,' he says with a sidelong glance, provoking in me only a short laugh, since such categories are of interest only to humans.

We go on much further in silence, until the daylight is drawing back between the trees and night blows down on a dry cold wind. The bat has come out of Luck's sleeve and is wheeling above us, crunching on insects that it snatches out of the air. For the last league or so I have been walking with an arrow nocked to my bow, not really intending to shoot anything, just turning to and fro, tensing and relaxing the string, enjoying the game. Now, at last, I send the arrow sailing off ahead, and a sharp metallic *tink* comes back out of the shadows.

Luck goes tense at once. 'What is it?'

'Nightfall,' I say, laughing.

Not much further along the path, we come to a wooden gate standing alone, without a fence. My arrow has impaled one of a line of copper bosses along the top of the gate. Beside it there is a wooden box hung on a stanchion, with a slit in the top for coins.

'What's this?' Luck asks.

The toll-gate of Cacogast the troll, who dwells in a stone

tower not far from here. He and I are old foes. No doubt he would like to put me in his cooking pot, but always I am too quick for him.'

Luck looks to right and left, wise enough in sorcery not to stray off the trail, then he takes a coin out of his pouch. I see its yellow glint in the twilight just before he drops it into the box. He pushes open the gate and steps through, the gate swinging closed on creaky hinges behind him.

'Well?' he says after he's gone a few steps, peering back through gloom that must be like darkness to his eyes.

'A gold coin?' is the first thing I say when I find my voice. 'You left Cacogast a *gold coin*!?'

'I don't have any silver,' he replies, and then, 'I don't know these woods. Why should I risk some troll's curse, or his wrath? My gold will be worth nothing if the Fimbulwinter comes.'

Still stunned, I stand there shaking my head, holding up the coin on a piece of string that I always use to pay Cacogast's toll. 'But *gold* . . .'

Then I have an idea, and with my knife in my hand I am digging at the box, trying to worry the knife-point between the slats and work them apart. The wood makes a noise like an apple crunching underfoot as it splinters, but the blade slips away with little effect even after a second, and third attempt. Cacogast has chosen good wych elm for his carpentry, a tough wood to crack if like me you use only a bronze knife.

Luck's bat gives a high, whistling, warning squeak and I can feel his nerves bristle even before his voice catches, saying, 'The troll's coming..!'

By this time I have managed to loosen one of the nails by gouging at the wood around it. Luck starts to move off down the trail, staring blindly into the darkness, anxious, his fear stinging my nostrils, but now there is no question of my giving up. My original aim was not so much to get the gold coin for myself (though it would be useful) as to deprive Cacogast of it, but now that I can hear him

lumbering closer, his sweaty bulk crashing through the undergrowth, I cannot even think of leaving until I have the box open. It is a question of pride that a mortal like Luck could never understand. My long, long years of battle with Cacogast, our battles of wits, are decided by petty victories like this — him with a broken toll-box to be repaired, me borne away on fleet heels with the coin that was nearly his.

The slats part, opening a space wide enough for my fingers to dart in and fish for the coin. I pull it out, savour the flash of gold in my hand for only an instant, and glance behind me. Cacogast is here, his broad body filling the air like an oak, his face like a hairy pumpkin-lamp full of sticky brown teeth, his heavy arms outstretched to seize me. He smells of stale blood and worse. I don't waste time thinking but leap, one hand snaking out towards the gate so as to somersault over it to safety. Luck has already made himself scarce. The troll's clumsy fingers twist at thin air, his dismayed grunt releasing a gust of giddy breath like the smell of a stagnant pond, and I sail over his grasp, my body moving through the air like a salmon, like a squirrel, gracefully arcing towards ...

...freedom, when suddenly there is a harsh ripping noise and I am jerked back, stumbling to fall in an ungainly heap across the gate. Dazed, I am too late to struggle as Cacogast takes hold of me in his huge leathery hands. As he lifts me across his shoulder, voice like gravel chortling at his good fortune, I see what it was that caught my cloak. The shaft of the arrow that I shot into the gate before.

So, later, I am hanging upside down in the troll's den, waiting while his stew simmers over the fire in preparation for that final elfish ingredient. There is a gag over my mouth — a scrap of rancid cloth, tied there once Cacogast tired of the stream of curses I had been devising to keep myself occupied. Cacogast himself sits at the table on a stool that's too small, his huge blubbery legs akimbo, and his jowls

working as he samples the roots that he's slicing for a garnish. There is a rip in his greasy trousers, displaying ochre flesh with a few clumps of some kind of fungus in among the bristles.

There is a knock at the door. Cacogast stops peeling a carrot, turns very slowly to stare at the door. His eyes remind me of small dirty pebbles. He continues to look at the door for some while, during which time whoever it is knocks again. Finally this seems to trickle through into Cacogast's head, and he gets up and, after fastidiously wiping each stubby finger on a rag the colour of mud, he slowly ambles over to the door, spends another long moment in deep and obviously effortful thought, then lifts the bar and opens it.

Luck is standing there, striking a fop's pose against the jamb, twirling the ivy cudgel like a cane in his hands and returning Cacogast's look of uncomprehending hostility with a witless grin. Despite his arrival on the doorstep being very unexpected, I think I begin to see a certain sense in it, since possibly he has resigned himself to his odd belief that the world is coming to an end and prefers to get it over with quickly, courtesy of the troll's pot.

'Hello,' he says with lunatic cheerfulness, like a mortal who has never heard any troll stories, and then, after glancing back into the darkness, he adds, 'I think I'm lost.'

Naturally Cacogast is not quick to respond to this, reacting like a very fat owl that has just had a mouse dropped right in front of it.

'I need a place to shelter for the night,' Luck goes on. He's still smiling, surely deranged. Maybe being boiled alive won't seem so bad that way.

'Shelter .. ?' Cacogast's voice sounds like his tongue is too big for his mouth. Suddenly a thought takes him unawares, and he opens the door wider, waving Luck in. His attempt at a crafty look is frankly laughable, mainly because he cannot stop his mouth watering as he says, 'Yes, come and warm yourself by the hearth, traveller.'

Luck tosses Cacogast his cloak and staff, ignores the resulting glare of annoyance, and strides briskly over to the fireside, rubbing his hands in the warmth. I can see – but Luck cannot, having turned his back on the troll – that Cacogast is watching him with a wary look. He starts to reach for the rusty flensing knife hanging on the wall, then he thinks better of it. Instead he takes down a flask of apple brandy and pours two generous goblets. With a chain of reasoning that I would never have believed him capable of, Cacogast has realized that Luck might be more dangerous than he seems, that it might pay to tread carefully. At this point it also occurs to me that perhaps Luck has not gone mad after all, and that this is what he is counting on – tricking Cacogast and then using his sorcery on him. There are two reasons why I am not quite convinced by this theory. One is that trolls are immune to mortal sorcery, and it is impossible that Luck would not know it. The other is that there is no sane reason for Luck to have come back here when he could have got away scot-free.

‘Have a drink.’ Cacogast slumps back down on the stool, causing the legs to creak, and I wonder why it didn’t break long ago. He pushes one of the goblets across the table and starts slurping from the other.

Luck nods and smiles, takes the goblet and sips some apple brandy. Even from where I am hanging, in the fire-smoke and the steam from the pot, the fumes leap at me, sharp as thistles – the stuff must hit his throat like hot oil. He manages to stifle a cough, but his eyes pop open wide and a red flush rises across his face. ‘This is an ... excellent ... liqueur,’ he says with some effort.

‘Good, good,’ grunts Cacogast, *glug glug* as he pours more into the cups.

All this time Luck has not even looked at me, but now he nods in my direction. ‘Having an elf for supper?’

‘That’s right,’ says Cacogast, using the back of his hand to wipe the brandy and spittle off his lips.

‘Not much meat on it.’ This in a conversational tone,

after a long look of appraisal.

'I'll have special cause to relish that one,' Cacogast says. Then he glances over at me too, a more critical survey than before, and almost under his breath he adds, 'Hardly a full meal, though, come to think of it.'

'I've heard you can get food poisoning from elves.'

'No...' Cacogast sounds unsure, gives it a second thought, shakes his head. 'No. Anyway, humans don't eat elves, do they?'

'Oh yes, where I come from. With parsnips and grated truffles. Delicious.'

Cacogast scowls, deep furrows appearing in his brow at this news. 'I don't have any truffles,' he says after a moment.

'Shame.' Luck takes another sip of brandy, handling it much better now. I admire his act, though I cannot see where it's leading, apart of course from the cooking-pot.

Something is worrying Cacogast, but it takes him some hard thought to work out what it is. 'But what about the food poisoning?' he says at last.

'Excuse me?'

'*The food poisoning,*' repeats Cacogast, stressing each word, on the edge of losing his temper now that he suspects Luck might be making fun of him.

'Obviously, you have to wash them before cooking, get all the dirt off. And you have to be careful with the skinning and gutting, of course.'

'Skinning? Gutting?' Cacogast's jaw is slack with either drunkenness or amazement. He takes another look at me, finding it hard to focus after the brandy he's poured down his throat. 'There'd be nothing *left*,' he protests.

'Is it quality or quantity you're after?' replies Luck in a reasonable tone of voice.

'Quantity.' Of course. No need even to consider that one.

Luck smiles, shrugs, takes another delicate sip of brandy.

'You know what I think?' says Cacogast, tiring of all this. He scrutinizes Luck with narrowed eyes. 'I think you're

waiting for me to get drunk and fall asleep so you can make off with my elf. But I reckon that isn't going to happen. What I reckon's going to happen, I'm going to have two kinds of meat in my stew tonight.' He sways forward and tries to prod Luck in the ribs, but misses because he's already feeling the effects of the apple brandy.

Luck looks around the room as if hardly listening. 'You might have to go hungry,' he murmurs suavely.

I am aching to say something myself, but the gag makes it impossible. I wriggle slightly in my bonds, and they both forget what's going on for a second and look at me.

'Supper's getting frisky,' says Cacogast, a remark which could be humorous but isn't the way he says it. He glowers at Luck. 'Also, I can smell sorcery. Spells have a special reek to them. I can smell them on you. I think you don't know that I know that...' He lets it go. This is too much for him to hold in his head.

'You think I don't know that you know I'm a wizard,' supplies Luck helpfully. 'But I do.'

The moment's arrived. Cacogast starts to get up, his eyes brimming with malice. Reaching across the table, he growls, 'Then obviously you don't know that mortal spells have no effect on me. You're for the pot, little man.'

Luck just calmly shakes his head. 'It's your goose,' he says, 'that's cooking tonight.'

It happens very fast. Luck takes a gulp of brandy, holding it in his cheeks, and throws the rest of the goblet into Cacogast's face, and Cacogast is staggering back with the liquid stinging his eyes as Luck sloshes the contents of the jug over him, and then Cacogast gives vent to an enormous bellow of rage but this is as nothing to what happens when Luck spits out the brandy in a spray, simultaneously igniting it with a flame-spell, engulfing Cacogast in a fireball that his immunity to magic can do nothing about. Then Cacogast is flailing about, crashing into the table, flopping on the flagstones, and squealing as the flames billow around him, but he cannot escape, and

when Luck sees my sword Woe in a corner and uses it to spear the misfortunate troll through the heart, I feel a sudden unfamiliar twinge of – what? Pity? Anyway, it is misplaced and passes in an instant.

Luck stands looking at the blazing carcass, sword-tip poised on the floor by his feet. There is a lingering haze of greasy smoke in the air and a sizzling sound as the troll burns. Then, with a style I admire, Luck checks the contents of his goblet and, finding a few drops of brandy there, drains it with a flourish.

‘Now, Eildonas,’ says Luck, still with the bland smile he has worn throughout all the foregoing, ‘what are we going to do with you?’

I wait until he removes the gag to tell him that I admired the deftness with which he overcame the troll. ‘All that aside, with thanks and so forth, just cut me down now and we’ll continue on our way out of the forest.’

He hesitates. Crossing to the table, he picks up a slice of carrot and thoughtfully munches it. ‘The thing is . . .’ he begins slowly, ‘...I’ve saved your life, and there’s the Principle of Defrayal to consider. It strikes me as very similar to another situation that occurred earlier.’

Choking back outrage I manage to splutter, ‘Only in a superficial way! You needed to kill the troll to save your own life, not mine.’

‘But,’ he says, leaning over the table, smacking his lips and trying to choose between an apple and a bowl of walnuts, ‘I didn’t need to come back, did I?’

‘That was your decision,’ I counter. ‘I didn’t ask you to come back. Why should I repay you for putting yourself in jeopardy?’

He sighs. ‘Fine. Stay where you are. Tomorrow morning I’ll find my own way out of the woods.’

‘All right,’ I concede. ‘You can have the sword back that I took off you. Now, mortal, *will you let me down?*’

‘The sword?’ He chuckles, almost sheepish. ‘No, no, you can keep the sword.’ Then he gives me a sharp look, and

for some reason I get a sudden sensation of being a fish that he's about to reel in. 'There's something else I want from you, Eildonas.'

'What's that?' I ask.

'I want you to help me save the world.'

3: THE BARBARIAN'S TALE

Attend my words! For I am Asgrim, son of Thunrir the Gold-Giver, grandson of Korek Trollslayer. In former days, when but a boy, I stood in defence of the hall with the other thanes, even when those older than I took fright and hid among their mothers' skirts. As a youth I went with spear and sword up to the fells, there to deal harshly with a night-gaunt that had preyed on my father's herd; it ate no more cattle after that. By the time of my first summer as a grown man, I was already a veteran of reaving-raids. The deaths of many fierce foes were accounted to my name, and my glory had grown along with the gold rings that I wore resplendent. Yet now my arms are bare.

Attend my words. And if you find them bound in books, do not let them languish there. Warriors' words were not meant to lie locked in ink and parchment, riddled in writing, food for Time and worms. Richly recite what you read, so that you shall hear my tale unfold as I speak it now beside my campfire.

Flesh-rasping, bone-gnawing, stealer of blood-warmth — the north wind rolled across the plain. It was a day of high hurrying clouds, the light departing quickly with the onset of evening. I watched the sky above the northern mountains turn to the colour of iron as rain, wind-driven, rushed amid the crags. All hastened to pen their livestock and seek shelter, strong doors fastened against the wild weather.

The fire of the hearth soon banished the day's chill. Gathered at the benches, the warriors feasted on baked meat and bread, their horns brimming with beer. Voices were raised in laughter and song—a more joyous shouting than the storm's sound outside—and the minstrel's fingers made merry harp-play for the entertainment of that company.

Then came a rapping at the door, sharply resounding above the clamour, echoing along the hall till all fell silent. Other than the wind's sough, muffled by walls of stout oak, there was for a space of several heartbeats no sound to be heard throughout the whole hall. Then the knocking sounded again, and now my father's chamberlain, the loyal Thidrand, strode steadfastly to answer it. 'Who is it that goes abroad on so foul a night?' he called forth through the door's timbers. 'Be you demon, devil or other hobgoblin? If so, know that here are fifty dauntless warriors, the troop of Thunrir Korekson, and there is not a man among us who would not sell his life dear in defence of his earl.'

'No demon or goblin am I,' replied the voice from the other side of the door. 'Hresna is my name, a wanderer from far away, but one of noble birth. I hear your claims of courage, and I have this to say: the true measure of a man lies in his heart as well as in the strength of his arm. No doubt your earl is a great bestower of riches, wise and just and battle-bold. Will he refuse hospitality to a wayfarer who stands at the threshold of his hall?'

Thidrand looked for an answer in my father's face and he, heedful of honour's needs, nodded assent. The bar was lifted, the door swung open; the stranger came into the hall.

A glance was enough to tell that he was no warrior. He was without sword, spear or shield; no cuirass burdened his slight shoulders, and instead of a helm it was a wide hat that he wore on his brow. His beard was long and white, turned by age to something like silk. A branch of ash-wood served him for a staff. He advanced along the boards, past the hearth, between the benches watched by silent thanes, to stand before the high seat of my sire.

He stood there, stooped under the weight of the haversack he carried, water running from his cloak and pattering on the floor. As I beheld him, sitting at my father's left, the firelight framed him from behind and set thick shadows in the sockets of his eyes. I saw a gleam like old

pearl as he smiled. 'Greetings and good health, Thunrir, lord of the Valrings. I go by the name of Hresna, and right glad am I to share your hearth on such a night as this. Warmth and shelter are welcomed by the wayfarer who has travelled long leagues across the fells.'

My father nodded. 'You are indeed welcome to my hospitality, Hresna, for I would not have any man go unsheltered by night in this season of storms, when the great god Eerg spits his fury from the sky. Now tell us of your origins. Who are your people?'

'Earl Thunrir, they are called the Nastrondings.'

My father formed a frown under beetling brows. He had never heard of such a people, and something in the sound of their name was like a harbinger of grue. Still, he had sworn to show hospitality to the stranger, and now he waved him towards the shut-bed at the rear of the hall, inviting him to stow his pack. I and my brother Unferth went too, bearing tapers to guide him. As the stranger rummaged in his sack, a glisk of gold showed among the rags – a marvellous arm-ring, yellow as firelight, set about with gems like drops of fresh blood. I heard an intake of breath and glanced to see the gold-sheen lying across my brother's face, his eyes wide and eager at the sight. The man of the Nastrondings seemed not to notice. He placed the ring on his wrist, under the fustian sleeve, and slid the pack into a corner.

The stranger emerged from the shut-bed and accepted a drink from Thunrir's wife. He would have gone down among the benches then but, bidden by my father, he joined us at the high seat.

'You told my chamberlain that you are of noble birth, Hresna,' said my father. 'What has brought you so far from your homeland, alone, weaponless and without a single warrior to stand beside you?'

The stranger raised his wine-cup. 'I thirst,' he said. 'But it is a thirst that all your generosity could never help me slake, nor any grape-yield quench, for it is a thirst for

knowledge. I desire to drink deep of matters unknown to other men.'

'Such an ambition has taken many men to their doom,' replied my father simply, for the Valrings are wary of curiosity.

'I am ancient in years,' answered Hresna. 'I have more to gain from wisdom than to lose.' Setting down his wine-cup, he went on: 'I have heard it said that close by this hall stands a sacred standing-stone, a fane to All-Father Eerg, who is revered also in my own land. I have come in high hopes to visit this fane, there to make an offering to the god.'

'Tomorrow we will go there together, you and I,' said my father, not one to be outdone in his gifts to the Gods.

The stranger shook his grey head. 'It has been made plain to me by portents that my sacrifice must be made on this very night. That is why I hurried on here through the dusk, to reach your doors by the appointed hour.'

Outside, the rain still spat in gusts against the shutters and rustled in the thatch of the roof, north-gales heaving against walls of oak — unwelcome visitors.

'This is a harsh night,' said my father. 'The god will not think ill of you for delaying your worship till daybreak.'

At this, the stranger gave a bleak laugh. 'Eerg the Unforgiving? The Grim God? He has ended men's lives for much less. But you are right to refuse — I am the intruder here, and I do wrong to presume upon your patience. What man could find fault with the hospitality of the son of Korek, just because he does not care to venture out into the storm with an old mad guest?'

This caused my father concern, for the stranger had spoken in a strong voice so that many of the hall-thanes had heard his words. Now they listened to hear their lord's reply.

'So be it!' He turned to Unferth, elder of his sons. 'Go you now with our guest. Escort him to the standing-stone, guard him while he makes his offering to Eerg, then bring

him safely back.'

Unferth sprang to his feet, avid to serve, took up his spear and buckled his battle-knife to his belt. He waited at the doors for the stranger, and together they went out into the night.

Time passed but they did not return. At last, the feasting over, flames burning low in the hearth, the time came for sleep. Benches were pushed back; pallets and pillows were laid out along the walls. Each warrior bent to his bed with his shield of polished linden-wood at his head, his sword by his side, and his helm and war-gear hung on the wall above him. Among the Valrings, it is always our custom to be ready for the fray.

Ignoring the wind's sighs, men fell to slumber, snores rumbling along the wainscot. Only the two assigned as sentries stayed awake, hard-eyed under their helmets; no ale had passed their lips that evening.

A pounding on the doors brought uproar. Roused, the thanes made ready for war, the fury of the sound making them fear that some uncanny host had stolen off the fens to attack the hall. Spears bristled beside my father as, with sword in hand, he marched to the doors. I was beside him, my shield held ready to bear the brunt of any assault on him, my blade keen to bite at his foes.

As we reached the doors, he glanced at me. 'Where is Unferth?' he said.

'Father, he has not yet returned.'

'Open up!' cried the voice of the one outside. 'It is I, Unferth. Open up!'

At my father's command, the door was opened to admit him. Unferth staggered in, swathed in sleet; a gory gouge along his arm left his sleeve sticky with his own blood. Another wound showed at his temple, blood flowing from a livid weal, black against white flesh. The stranger was not with him. Straining against the gales that now pressed eagerly in among us, the sentries closed the door.

'What has happened?' said our father. 'Where is the one

entrusted to your care?’

With effort, Unferth struggled to stay on his feet, to answer his lord boldly despite the wound. ‘Wading into the teeth of the gale, we reached the fane at last,’ he said, gasping deeply between the words, ‘and Hresna made ready with his offerings. But then he bade me go a little way off so that his prayers would be undisturbed. I did so; but the storm was so severe that, mindful of your adjuration, I went back to watch secretly over him. Imagine my horror when I heard his mutterings, for they were no prayers, but vile curses uttered against Eerg and the other gods —and at that most holy spot! He cannot have been a reasonable man.’

‘Go on,’ said the lord grimly.

‘My only thought was to put a stop to such profanity before he brought disaster on his own head and on all of us. I stepped smartly forward to seize him, but then a light like that seen in a ship’s rigging flickered atop the standing-stone — blue tongues of flame, impervious to rain’s onslaught. The baying of hounds could be heard, the pounding of hooves, hot breath of stallions, the baleful blare of a hunting horn. Shadows stirred in the heart of the storm.’

A murmur of fear stirred us all then; for we Valrings, who fear nothing on the middle world, fear the wrath of the gods. What Unferth had described was the Wild Hunt.

‘At once I was beset,’ Unferth went on. ‘Hellhounds leapt at me, slavering jaws gaping, red eyes rimmed with fire. I determined then to show all-mighty Eerg how his warriors die, and my spear-point struck again and again into their midst. Then the spear was wrenched from my grip, stuck fast in a hound’s flanks. Fangs ripped my arm and, even as I lashed out with naked fists, a hoof struck my brow and consciousness fled. I awoke frozen through to the core, half my lifeblood washed away by rain. Of Hresna there was no sign at all; the God rewarded his insolence, right enough.’

‘What was done, was done well,’ announced our father

on hearing this. 'We offered all kindness to the stranger, as honour demands. It could not be expected of us to anticipate his madness, and Unferth's miraculous survival shows that Eerg holds us free of blame. Tomorrow the shaman will purify the fane of any taint. Return to your beds — there is nothing to be done now that cannot wait until dawn.'

He ordered mulled wine brought for Unferth, and the women came to tend my brother's wounds. As each warrior returned to his rest, he paused to pay compliment to Unferth's bravery. I myself presented him with my best spear to replace the one he'd lost. If I had realized then the full depths of his villainy, my words of congratulation would belike have become ashes in my throat.

The next day was favoured with fairer weather, and it was my father's whim to enjoy the morning in falconry with his chief thanes. We stood under a sky of cold blue, shadows of clouds sweeping across the wide plain, watching the birds wheel above their prey.

Unferth held a hooded hawk; still wild and surly, it could not be trusted without a creance. As he hefted it, stirring its wings, his sleeve slipped back and ruby-studded gold was revealed for all to see.

'That is a fine ring you wear, Unferth,' said my father. 'Tell us how you came by it.'

My brother's reply shocked me, seeing as he counted it no shame to lie to our sire. 'Father,' he easily answered, 'I found it. As I hunted alone three days past, deep in a cleft of rock, under a spring, I saw a shimmer like bright metal. Thinking it a fish, I thrust in my hand; but it was no carp or bream that my fingers found. Anciently-wrought gold was my catch that day, rich rubies my hunt-prize.'

Father nodded slowly, eyes still on his hawk under its hood. As he whisked away the hood, its hard eyes fixed on something scurrying in the long grass — a mouse, unseen to us. It shot like a bolt, fell upon its quarry, ended life with

swift economy. Returning to its master's gauntlet at his call, its talons were wet with blood. A slave went to find the mouse.

It was not the time then to confront Unferth with his lies. I sought him out later, as he walked alone along the bluff above the camp. He did not notice my approach at first, so intently did he watch the lengthening shadows of afternoon gather in the glen. What brooding thoughts boiled under his brow? Any other man would have been filled with shame to have acted as he had, but to my eyes it did not seem that Unferth was dispirited to be adorned with stolen gold.

Hearing my footstep he turned. 'Ali, brother, stand with me and share this view, breathe in the crisp air. Do you know that scent? It is spring, brother; winter is on the retreat.'

'I do not think that is the scent you smell, brother,' I said darkly. 'I think it is the stench of perfidy, the odour of oath-breaking.'

'Because of this?' He brandished the stolen ring, laughed in my face. 'It was my good fortune to see it first. But do not let jealousy eat at your heart, brother - another time it will be your turn.'

'My turn for what? To murder an unarmed old man for the sake of his gold?'

Anger darkened Unferth's face. 'What business is it of yours?' he snarled. 'Was he a kinsman, that his death should be a matter for mourning? At his age he would have departed the world soon enough in any case. His life was not the least use to anyone, and gold is wasted on scrawny arms when it serves a warrior better!'

'The stranger was an invited guest,' I said, cooling each word before I spat it forth. 'The murder contravenes our father's command, shames his hospitality, dishonours the whole of the Valring people. That is a weighty price for a trinket of gold and gems, in my view.'

Narrowly he watched me then. 'And what do you

propose to do? Run to our father with this tale?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’ll not raise my voice against my brother. But it is not seemly that such rank wrongdoing should go unpunished. You must leave the Valrings, go into exile, become a wanderer. Only in this way can I be sure that you will bring no more shame on our family.’

‘You are mad,’ he said with a sneer. ‘Why should I meekly become an outcast just because you demand it? I am the elder. When Thunrir dies, I shall be your liege-lord.’ His voice lowered, finding a pitch appropriate to spite. ‘I know full well that it is not love of honour that makes you say all this, Asgrim. You coveted the stranger’s arm-ring for yourself, just as you covet the high seat in my stead. So do not flaunt your self-righteous rage in my face, brother. I see through it too well.’

I had drawn my sword before I knew it, battle-fury whelming reason. My muscles bunched like bands of iron.

Unferth looked at the sword. ‘Do you intend to use that?’

My senses returning, anger boiling away in an instant, I followed his gaze to the grey sword that lay in my hand. Not for anything could I wield blade against my brother. I cast it on to the wet grass, full of disgust. ‘No,’ I said. I turned to walk away.

‘Then more fool you, brother,’ said Unferth, ‘since now I cannot let your life continue.’

With a hiss his sword slid from its sheath, cleaving the air as he leapt towards me. I whirled, catching his wrist with both hands, and the force of his thrust carried us back. My feet slipped in the mud, but as I fell I brought my knees against Unferth’s stomach, driving up with all my strength so that he went flying. His head struck a rock, and there was a short sound like a flint breaking. He gave a gasp; his eyes rolled up; he writhed a moment, then lay still.

Thus, in no longer than it takes to tell it, I became the slayer of my brother.

The keening of the womenfolk mingled with men's groans of grief as I came down towards the hall bearing the Valring heir in my arms. Life had fled from his body; his face now, as though asleep, bore none of the secret malice it had hidden when he was alive. I stood on the forecourt, in front of the doors of the hall, while Thidrand bore the news to my father. He came out, emerging from the shadows of the hall like one walking grudgingly to the gallows. He found no joy in the sight he saw. He was an old man, but I had never seen the years sit so heavily on him as at that moment.

Without a word, he took the body from me, kissed the broken forehead. Then he raised his head high towards heaven, and sent up such a howl, a loud lament, that it sounded as though the world itself were about to crack in two. All under the wide welkin, no man has ever issued such a shout of sorrow; the gods themselves could not have failed to notice it.

Father fixed me with dull eyes. 'Tell me what has transpired,' he said. 'Though it racks me to hear it, I must know the truth – how has it come about, this evil day on which I have lost my firstborn son?'

'We fought; it ended in Unferth's death.' It was all I could say.

'I must know more than that,' said my father. 'What was the cause of the quarrel?'

How could I answer? Even if it were not unworthy to abuse a dead man, I had made a vow to Unferth not to speak of the matter. 'All that I can say is this: if I could undo my actions, even to the extent of myself dying in my brother's place, I would do so. It was not my intent to take his life.'

'This sentiment comes too late for Unferth; now he is at peace,' said my father, speaking not only to myself but to the whole gathering. 'No blood-gold can be claimed for this calamity, nor can I look to feuding for settlement of my sadness. My firstborn has now become like gallows-fruit, ripe for the raven, and nothing will give me solace, since it

is my other son who has done the deed.'

In the hush that followed his words, there came a grumbling out of the ground at our feet, a slight stirring. All knew what it betokened, and turned their gazes out across the plain. Stretching from the west was a furrow of disturbed soil, like a mole's track, rapidly onrushing. The shaman came then, erupting up from the earth, soil spilling from his shoulders where he stood, grown from the ground like an oak. He wore a mantle of moss, but other than that he was proudly naked.

'Unferth has left the living world,' said the shaman, nodding in sombre satisfaction over the corpse; 'I knew it would happen.'

'And Asgrim is his killer,' said my father. Like other men, I am sure, he feared the shaman, who seldom came among us except – as now – for dour dealings; and yet he hid it well.

The shaman speared me with a stare, hawk eyes under blue woad, the bald egg of his head crawling with secret lore. Then he threw up his arms, moss cloak flung back, and spun to address the crowd: 'When a man murders his brother, that man must be cast out. No longer can he be counted as one of the clan; the Norns have woven him a future without family. He shall become a wave-man, tossed to and fro by fate. From this day, let him have no man he can call kin.'

That was how I became an exile from my people, the Valrings. Taking only my war gear, stripped of the gold hall-gifts of my father, I left that same night. I walked out, with not even a horse to ride, past a silent throng of faces who had been known to me all of my life. They were like ghosts now, glowering in torchlight, though the truth was that it was I who had become ghost-like: sundered from hearth, expelled from hall. A man without family is like one who has no history, a forlorn revenant haunting the earth. He belongs nowhere, has no lord to love and fight for, nor bench-brothers to hear his tales.

Consider the ways of Fate – as I did beside my campfire that night, alone under the harsh stars. Careless of men's concerns, it bears our destinies like leaves on the wind. How could I have known in the dawn light of that day that, by the time of sun's setting, I would have slain my father's son and been banished to the far fells? Fate, neither cruel nor kind, takes no notice of our lives.

Staring into the fire, I was abruptly aware of a presence beyond the flames, a figure lingering among the shadows of the night. Hairs prickled on the nape of my neck, but I felt strangely sluggish as I reached for my sword, clutching it with nerveless fingers.

My eyes peered at the newcomer, picking at the dim outline as it shimmered above the fire. At one instant he seemed a gnarled man leaning on a spear, the next a visitant from the void. When he spoke I had to strain to catch the words, almost losing them amid the wind's keening and the snarl of burning logs.

'Do you look for your destiny in the pyre?' he cackled. 'That is the pastime of children and old men. I mistook you for a warrior.'

It mystified me that, when I answered him, I heard no rage in my voice. Despite his taunts, icy eeriness held me in its grip. 'I am a warrior – or was. Now I'm an exile.'

The air wavered like water, masking the stranger with a veil. 'Opportunities for glory abound in the world,' he said. 'Some men rise to fame among their kinsmen, earning honours along with their battle-comrades. Others are marked for a sterner fate. They must ride alone, destined to be more than mortal men. That is the path of heroes.'

'I can hardly hope for such a fate,' I said ruefully. 'My people shun me. It is not because of any evil-doing that this has happened, but because I admired honour more than reputation. Even if my valour were greater than any man's throughout the world, who would sing my hero-songs now?'

'You must shape your own fate,' said the stranger flatly. 'Honour has no material reward; often heroes must make

do without gold or renown, their deeds known only to themselves and the great gods.' 'What notice would the gods take of me?'

'More than you could guess. Listen now; I shall tell you of your future.'

The fire on my face, cold wind across my shoulders, sorrow in my heart and ache in weary limbs – all had made me drowsy. As the stranger droned on, face full of shadows under the wide brim of his hat, my eyelids fluttered. I tried to listen, but his words merged into a dull distant roar, like the surging of the sea. And if he did indeed foretell my future, I cannot say that I remember any of it.

I woke to a bright cold dawn. Untended, the fire had shivered to warm ashes beside me. As wakefulness returned, I realized that others were approaching, and I leapt to my feet to face them. Two walked towards me, out of the forest that fills the lowlands beside the steppes. My ash-wood spear was in my right hand, my sword of battle-tempered iron in my left; I stood ready to give them a greeting.

They drew close, and now I saw that one was a mortal man and the other was an elf. The man wore red. He was no warrior, for all that he carried a cudgel and thought to conceal a knife in his boot; his hands were soft, his body fashioned by luxury rather than hardship. The elf, autumn-clothed, bore a slim sword with a look of treachery about it. He moved with suppleness, on nimble feet that doubtless served him well when blades clashed. Both showed me smiles, these strange companions.

My breath unfurled like a banner on the keen wind: 'Stand where you are, you weird pair. If you mean any mischief, you can expect short shrift from Asgrim of the Valrings.'

'Peace is our purpose; put aside your weapons.' It was the man who spoke. He crouched down and rubbed his hands over the remains of the fire.

'I have told you my name,' I said.

I am Fortunato, from the island of Truillon in far-off Sapinette. This is Eildonas of the Hulda. We are journeying north, to the World's Edge Mountains, on a quest of greater importance than any other matter in the world.'

Meanwhile, his friend the elf had been looking idly around, his manner like that of a child who is bored by the talk of adults. Now he spoke, and his voice was music: 'Far in the north, as I have heard it from this man's lips, lies a dragon hard-scaled and full of hatred. A hero of ancient times laid him low, penning him under slabs of ice. The dragon's blood ran sluggishly, so it is said, and his limbs were stilled, but he did not die. Dreams of destruction came to visit him in his misery, deep in the frozen lake—seven hundred winters while he plotted his vengeance. According to some I have spoken with, the time for this dragon's awakening is near. When he arises, he will breathe forth the fimbul-frost across the land, biting the flesh and withering the boughs, until everything lies under deep snow-drifts and no life stirs anywhere under the sky.' He glanced at Fortunato and added: 'That is what some would have us believe.'

'It is so,' Fortunato said simply.

I looked at them. The elf had swayed me with his words, even though he seemed to have no faith in their truthfulness himself. The man's sincerity decided the matter. Last night's dream-visitor had directed me on my path, exhorted me to glory. I vowed then, by my god and my sword and the strength of my sinews, to help them mete out death to the ice-dragon.

Fortunato jumped to his feet when he heard this, claspng my hand. Eildonas gave a moody nod.

'So, now we are comrades!' I cried eagerly. 'Let us go up into the north, then, we three, as the champions of the world. Either we shall win such glory to our names as no man before ever enjoyed, or else lay down our lives in the attempt.'

4: THE DWARF'S TALE

'Well, what are you gawping at?'

Just as I was beginning to think that things could hardly get worse!

Here am I, Anvil Delvanbreeks, held fast against a boulder by shackles of solid rock. Today I have had my work disturbed by a rabble of strepitous orcs (some of whom I chopped into mullock, the day's one good moment), been chained in rock by an orc witch's spell, and endured the uncivil curiosity of a human wizard and his simpering apprentices. Then the sky turned as grey as the hills, the temperature dropped along with the sun, and I had to watch an icicle forming on the end of my nose. Ten minutes ago the first sleet of the evening began to fall.

And now these three cretins come ambling up the path from the shores of the lake, looking like heroes in search of a noble death, and start talking about me as if I wasn't here, and as if all of this were something that only happened when they wandered on the scene!

'What is it?' says the biggest of them, a barbarian from the foothills if I'm not mistaken.

'A dwarf,' says the second, a slender elf with a vacuous look to him. 'Whoever sealed him in those stalactites had the right idea. Dwarfs have vicious tempers.'

'Aye, you elfin pest,' I tell him, 'you lean a mite closer and I'll show you just *how* bad-tempered.'

'Wait – wait, friend,' the third says, raising his hand. He's a mortal, like the barbarian, but smaller and with more of a healthy colour to his cheeks. A wizard, too, and no mistake.

'Do I look like I'm going anywhere?' I snarl back.

He touches the stone manacles and closes his eyes in thought. 'Magic forged these,' he says to the others.

'Well, blow me, aren't you the clever one, lad. And here

was I thinking I'd just been asleep too long and the whole ruddy boulder had grown around me!' (Venting my spleen might seem to be a waste of time, but it makes me feel better and at least it's dislodged that icicle.)

'Shall I kill it?' grunts the barbarian, loosening his sword in its scabbard.

'Toss the rude oaf into the lake to keep Kyrax company,' suggests the elf.

'No,' says the mage firmly (and who would have figured him for the leader?) before turning back to me. 'Allow us to make our introductions. I am Fortunate, this brawny fellow is Asgrim, and our elvish comrade is Eildonas. And you are...?'

'Cold, uncomfortable and not entirely in the mood to listen to a dandified nincompoop like you,' I tell him.

'Come now – for all you know, we might be here to help. You are very quick to repulse the possibility of freedom, my friend.'

'The name's Anvil.' (This is not my secret name, of course – I wouldn't tell *that* to a wizard, and I'm not telling you.) 'But I mention this only to stop you calling me "friend".'

'Here's a pickaxe,' says the barbarian, spotting my weapons where I dropped them, 'and a war-hammer. Good workmanship.'

The elf peers at them in the gloaming. 'And slick with blood.' He dabs at it, careful to avoid contact with the iron, and holds his fingers up. 'Whose blood is this, dwarf?'

'Orc blood,' I say.

'Orcs?' says the mage, suddenly alert. 'They are our foes too, friend Anvil. We are allies.'

'Don't jump to conclusions, lad – there weren't any elves or humans around while I was clobbering them.'

'Look,' says the barbarian, stepping closer and lowering his voice, 'do you want to pay attention to what Fortunate's saying, or do you want a sword through your neck?'

'You just hew me out of this rock, longshanks, and we'll see where that sword gets shoved.'

‘Enough of this,’ snaps the mage at his fellows. ‘We can proceed now, or try to recruit another ally. Comrades?’

‘Leave the surly little wight here,’ votes the barbarian.

The elf glances towards the cavern mouth. ‘I don’t know. A dwarf could be a useful companion in the underworld.’

The mage considers, then addresses me again. ‘I am always ready with an offer of friendship —perhaps too ready. Tell us how you came to battle the orcs, Anvil, and how you came to be in your current predicament. I have the sixth sense; if I judge you trustworthy, I’ll have Asgrim hack you free.’

I decide there’s nothing to lose. I might strain at this rock for a century before I broke it. And so I start to tell them the whole sorry tale.

Viewed from the other end (I begin), today looked full of promise. I was putting the finishing touches to my new cuirass – a rather tasteful affair in the preclassic style, with oblique sculpting across the breastplate and a strapwork of copper and silver on the pauldrons. Well, I’d gone to the front of my den to look out along the valley while I worked. It was a fine morning: the sky blue like cobalt, clouds as high and faint as the Milky Way. The air was bracing and clean, putting me in mind of melt-water from a frozen stream. Perched there on a stone seat, jewellery hammer in hand, bent over my workbench, I was as merry as a dwarf can be. Maybe the nip of thistle-wine I’d had before settling down to work had helped a bit, too.

It was the strapwork I was laying down. You have to be very careful with the fine detailing; it takes a steady hand not to mess up the lines of metal while they’re still soft from the furnace. I got to an especially intricate point, where the pattern has to recurve into a volute under the neck-guard. I bent low, peering intently, tongue between my teeth . . .

Right at the crucial moment, a thundering great shout rolled up the valley and dislodged the snow that had been accumulating over the lintel all winter. It fell with a trump

right over my shoulders, half burying me. Needless to say, as distractions go, this rated in the prime category of events you really don't want to have happen while you're doing fine metalwork. Brushing the snowflakes out of my eyes, I watched with horrified disbelief as a slug of half-molten silver rolled along the pauldron and slid into the pectoral-joint, sizzling on contact with a lump of snow and solidifying almost at once.

That was a day-and-a-half's work down the proverbial mine shaft, all because one inconsiderate traveller didn't think to observe the Mountain Code. To emphasize the wretchedness of the incident, an icicle hanging over the door chose this moment to snap. It shot down right between my fingers, seemed to stand frozen there on the work-bench for less than an instant, then shivered into hundreds of splinters.

I looked out from the ledge to see if I could catch sight of the miscreant, since I wanted to have a few words with him. Three of the words were 'chew', 'on' and 'that'.

Instead of one lone wayfarer, though, I saw now that there was a whole procession of them – fifteen in all, plus the wolves. They were beetling their way along the foot of the cliff right below the den, which was why I didn't see them until I leaned out. I took them for humans at first, partly because they were deporting themselves so boorishly and partly because they looked to be more than four feet tall. Then I noticed there was something funny about the way they walked. More of a sort of wolfish lope than a normal walk. And, cupping my ears, I made out a little of what they were calling to one another along the line as they went. It didn't sound much like any human tongue I've ever heard; it sounded more like a pack of consumptive warthogs clearing their throats after gargling with glue.

I got my peering-tube and took a closer look. Orcs! That came as a bitter blow. No dwarf likes orcs on his mountain, I can tell you. They're like elves (no offence, Eildonas) or fleas: once they infest an area, there's no getting rid of

them.

I decided to be circumspect. There wasn't any point just charging down at them headlong there and then, swinging my warhammer and baying for blood. Spoil half the fun if I got it over with too quickly, for one thing. No, better to scout out their strengths first, then really put the fear of god into them with the sort of sneaky ambush that only we dwarfs can do properly. Cramming on my helmet, I buckled the belt with my pickaxe, Gutgouger, and my hammer, Faceflattener, and started to make my way down the hillside.

Just when I was about halfway down, a fierce snarling started up. I mentioned that the orcs had a couple of rime-wolves with them, and these had obviously noticed me. They strained on their leashes, and now the orcs looked up, immediately babbling in agitation at the sight of a fully-armed dwarf clambering down the slope towards them. It was about this time that I caught my first whiff of them. In case you have never smelled orcs, I will just say that the odour is not dissimilar to what you would get if you were to drown a sewer-rat in skunk oil and then leave it behind the stove for a day or so. That's for a *clean* orc; this lot had probably not washed in months.

The one at the front started screeching orders, and the others responded by drawing jag-edged blades from their furs and taking a few steps up the slope towards me. One or two even tried a defiant war-cry, but the echo on the mountainside (along with the fact of having more teeth than their jaw-bones are suited to accommodate) rather lessened the overall effect.

'Stop that yelling, you mongrels,' I called back; 'don't you know the spring thaw's set in?'

'Come, dwarf! My sword yearns to split your stunted carcass,' bellowed the biggest of them, obviously not having heard a word I said. Orc hearing isn't as acute as a dwarf's, of course. But then, what is?

'Pipe down, I said ! The snow's thawing out !'

I don't think they heard me that time either, but

suddenly they pointed up the slope and started looking urgently at one another. The shouts took a definite shift from ferocity towards fear.

‘Aye, that’s right, you noxious spawn of devilment!’ I snarled. ‘Tremble at the sight of Anvil Delvanbrecks in the throes of his battle-fury!’

All right, I’ll admit to getting a little carried away by this time. But it seemed to do the trick. The orcs gave sudden cries of alarm, then threw up their arms and turned to flee.

I waved my weapons high over my head and continued ploughing down towards them. Since I’d lost the advantage of surprise, I thought I might as well use my apparent advantage of terrorization. The stragglers looked back over their shoulders as they ran. I was close enough now to see the slack, pallid expressions on their grotesque faces. They were screaming now in abject fear, though I couldn’t make out the words over the roar of (as it seemed to me) my enraged blood in my ears.

‘STOP THAT YELLING!’ I called again. ‘YOU’RE LIABLE TO CAUSE AN AVALAN—’

The snow hit me in the back like a pile driver; a blanket of cold darkness folded over the sky. I completed the last hundred paces of the descent in about three seconds. The last second in particular was quite uncomfortable, as the avalanche seemed to be trying to pick me up by my breeches and fold me over the wrong way at the waist while at the same time burrowing my face down hard into a pile of wet scree.

Digging my way out, I had time to reflect on my situation. I realized that I had been getting things out of proportion before. Where I’d thought I was angry, what I had been experiencing was in fact mere indignation. Real, blood-simmering, ear-pounding, nostril-cracking honest-to-goodness stark *rage* ... that was what I was feeling now. Simple slaughter was no longer on the agenda; I was going to apply some really creative violence in dealing with those orcs after this.

By the time I was out of the bank of snow, the orcs had covered quite a lot of ground. Apparently they had left me for dead, which suggests that they hadn't encountered many dwarfs before, since we are notoriously difficult to kill – almost as difficult as humans. (The elf nods sagely when I say this; the barbarian and the mage give each other a baffled look.)

They were heading along Mung's Shoulder, an arête of hard basalt that links my mountain to the peak of Angrbjorg – or Mount Anger, as you probably, mistakenly, call it. As I set out in pursuit, I couldn't help noticing that the flanks of Angrbjorg – usually clad thickly in snow even at this time of year – showed blackly under haphazard stretches of ice. I still don't know the reason for this, but I don't like it; it's a mystery, and mysteries give me belly-ache.

The orcs stayed unaware of me; I made sure of that. From where I was, I might have been able to hit one of them with a hurling-stone, but I didn't try it. Since they thought I was dead, I decided, I may as well let them go on thinking that right up until the moment I jumped them. I scurried from boulder to crag to snow-drift, careful to keep out of sight. Candidly, I don't think I needed to bother. Whatever errand had brought them up here to the top of the world, they were getting close to their goal now. They went scrambling up the slope like wolves who have spotted a lame goat. I watched them disappear over the lip of the caldera, then hurried to catch up.

As you will know (having just come across it), filling the caldera of this mountain is a frozen lake with an island of rock in the middle. Locally – within this mountain range, I mean, which we dwarfs call the Pillars of the Sky – the lake is known as the Locked Secret and the island is Iceheart Shore. I don't know why that is. It must predate the time that I moved into the area, which was – what, a couple of centuries ago.

I peeked over the edge of the caldera. The orcs went scurrying over the lake, clumsy as pack-mules on a pane

of ice, now and then trying to skate, but instead sliding and falling over in their haste. The one at the front seemed steady enough, though, plunging on with long strides and shrieking back curses at the others for failing to keep up.

I started out across the ice, keeping low – I mean, lower than usual – to avoid being seen. I don't think I've ever been up on to the Locked Secret before. In fact, come to think of it now, didn't I hear something off Helmgar Stonebrow about the place being off-limits – cursed, in fact? At the time I thought it was just the drink talking, but now I'm beginning to get a nasty feeling that Helmgar was making sense for once.

There was something huge buried deep in the ice underfoot. Only a dwarf's eyes could have seen it. Even so, I could only make it out as a shadow, a glimmer like tarnished silver submerged in blackness, suspended unmoving in an icy tomb. It looked to consist of thick serpentine coils armoured with spike-covered plates, wings the size of clouds folded along the vast body, talons big enough to crush boulders. It looked like ... well, if I didn't know better then I'd say it was a ...

No ... it couldn't be ...

Anyway, I reached the island and made my way cautiously up the trail. The orcs were clustered around that cave mouth you can see yonder, only the cave at that time was sealed with a huge block of ice. The leader was staring at some tattered bits of parchment and croaking some magic words while the others droned on in a kind of off-key chant. As they stopped chanting, there was a moment of silence when you could hear nothing, not even the howl of the wind, and then a deep crack to rattle the teeth. The block fell in half, melting in front of my eyes, and the leader said, 'Now we shall set him free.'

The voice sounded like something nasty slithering about in the recesses of a cavern, but there was something unmistakable about it that sent a shiver of realization down my spine. How can I describe the characteristic I

recognized? Feminine is *not* the word that springs to mind. Hagged, crone-like or harpyish, perhaps, but not feminine. An old, ugly, female orc with a capacity for powerful magic; my mind assembled the facts, and suddenly it was like a light turned on inside my head illuminating a sign saying *A witch. Get out quick.* And with that revelation, my anger vanished and instead of the urge to do some serious violence to orc flesh and bone, I suddenly found myself giving serious attention to the avenues of retreat.

Still in a crouch, I took a half-step back to find more cover. My foot came down on a rock, slid out from under me, and I lurched forward from behind the outcropping to land right among the orcs in an undignified sprawl.

That witch was on the ball, I have to give her that. While the other orcs stood around gaping, or curling their lips in slow-burn hatred, she sized up the situation in an instant and had an immediate remedy for it. 'Kill that dwarf!' she screamed.

Faceflattener was in one hand, Gutgouger in the other. I got up off my knees (wipe away that smirk, elf!) and glared around. So what if I was outnumbered fifteen to one? They were only orcs. I lashed out to the left, ducked a sword-swing, dug a knee in somewhere soft, lashed out to the right — now the odds were thirteen to one.

Recovering a little from the shock, three of the orcs mounted a solid front against me. They fought frenziedly, but basically it was a holding tactic while one of their cronies made his way up to a shelf of rock overlooking the path. They thought I hadn't noticed the plan, but I let them force me back to a point where the trail narrowed and then eviscerated the one directly in front with my pickaxe, catching the would-be backstabber with the return sweep as he jumped. But I hadn't reckoned on the speed of the next one. He leapt into the breach and delivered a strong strike that I barely managed to counter. Our weapons gave out a harsh clang and we both reeled back from the impact. But, whereas he stumbled into his fellows who were

pressing in too close behind him, I fell back against a rock face and braced myself to rebound into the fray.

'Enough!' shrilled the witch. She swept her hands out in a gesture that somehow caught hold of the fabric of the air and twisted it. Her next words — in a tongue older than any I've heard — fell like droplets of lead, and suddenly I felt myself seized from behind. These fetters, that you now see hold me tight, were sprouting out of the rock to encircle my arms and legs. In a trice I was trapped, pinned back so that I could get no leverage to break free. My weapons fell from my grasp as a result of mere incredulity.

The witch hobbled over, pushing aside her companions. I found myself staring at the nose growing out of her wart, the most remarkable feature in a very impressive inventory of hideous blemishes. I could also see her breath. Instead of white, it frosted greyly in the cold, and did not get carried away by the breeze (the clean mountain air very sensibly having nothing to do with it) but hung there, a festering miasma such as you might find over a stagnant pond. She leaned very close until I could smell it, too. I couldn't remember having eaten a live lizard for breakfast, but there it was in my stomach, doing cartwheels.

'Well, dwarf,' she said in her rickety voice, 'do you know what we're going to do with you?' Her tongue sliding across her fangs put me in mind of a snake, until I remembered that snakes aren't furry and covered in toadstools.

'I hope it gives you indigestion, you heinous hag.'

'Not eat you, silly,' Her gnarled hand plucked absently at my beard. 'A signal honour is in store. You will be the first sacrifice to my lord Kyrax when he arises from his death-sleep.'

The other orcs all snuffled with sordid good humour at this. I'd never heard of this Kyrax, but the rest of it sounded bad enough. And let's face it, it didn't matter if Kyrax was just her pet weasel. Being sacrificed is being sacrificed.

The witch stalked off into the cavern, her shoulders twitching with spasms of evil laughter, and the others filed

after her, each giving me a fang-filled grin as they left. The last two dragged the corpses of the ones I'd killed after them into the darkness.

It was quiet there in front of the cave, with just the slight sigh of the wind for company.

Time passed. I heard voices coming up the path from the lake. Then another group hove into view. This lot were humans, dressed in runic robes, but at least their leader sported a venerable beard. ('Matholem!' mutters the mage enigmatically as I say this.) They regarded me with expressions that were two parts suspicion to one part curiosity, then scrutinized the cave entrance.

'Did you see,' the bearded man said after a moment, 'a group of orcs pass by here?'

'Indeed I did I said helpfully, my patience not yet having been so sorely tried by that stage in the afternoon. 'After I slew several of them, their leader entrapped me in this rock and then they vanished into yonder cave.'

You can always tell a fanatic. They do things like pounding their left palm with their right fist, staring fixedly into middle-distance, or saying 'Ah-ha!' under their breath. This old cove was a natural. He had also added an imperious snap of the fingers and a precipitate stride to the traditional fanatic's repertoire.

('Definitely Matholem,' murmurs the mage this time.)

'Hey, wait a moment !' I cried to them as they headed off. 'Aren't you going to get me out of this?'

One of the young ones frowned an honest frown and said, 'We ought to free him, surely, master?'

'Not a bit of it, my lad' snorted the leader. 'It could be a trap — a transmogrified orc, an illusion, or something of that sort. We don't have the time to check it out now, and I'm in no mood to take chances.'

He spun on his heel (another dead giveaway) and swept off into the cave. The others followed. The one who had spoken up on my behalf looked back at me over his shoulder, gave a resigned shrug, and then he too was

swallowed up by the darkness.

‘So,’ I say, ‘that’s it. Are you going to free me, or what?’

The elf favours ‘what’. ‘Dwarfs are like orcs,’ he says — ‘dark-loving, chthonian creatures. He’d be an unreliable ally.’

‘If I like orcs so much, greenshoots, how come I did for a bunch of them not six hours ago?’

‘We only have his word on that,’ says the elf to the others. ‘If he really killed any orcs, then where are the bodies?’ Just my luck to encounter the one elf in the world with an ambition to practise law.

‘This isn’t human blood,’ counters the barbarian, holding up my weapons. ‘Human blood doesn’t have that green tinge to it.’ Thank bedrock for the no-nonsense commonsense of the average fighting man.

The sorcerer comes to a decision — one which, in the circumstances, I find rather sound. ‘Since we’ve come to fight evil, it’s appropriate that we rely on faith and trust,’ he says. ‘Chip him free, Asgrim.’

One thing I will say for this barbarian, he really knows how to swing a hammer. It only takes him a few well-placed blows to smash the rock holding me down. Three feet shorter and he’d make a good dwarf.

‘I’m glad we got all that sorted out,’ I say, rubbing the circulation back into my limbs. ‘Now, I’ll just take my gear and get out of your way.’

‘Wait,’ says the sorcerer, ‘aren’t you going to help us?’

‘Help you do what, laddie?’ I say as I wipe my axe and hammer clean with handfuls of snow.

‘Help us with our quest to save the world. Help us to fight evil.’

‘Save the world, is it? Fight evil, eh? Oh ho. Well the thing is, lad, saving the world always seemed to me to be in that category of Things that Really Express the Futility of It All. You know, no matter how much you do it’s never over with. Like washing-up.’

‘Somebody’s got to do it!’

‘That’s up to them, isn’t it? Me, I eat straight out of the cooking-pot and that saves all the bother.’

‘Of fighting evil?’

‘No, lad,’ I say, speaking slower now I realize he’s an imbecile. ‘Of washing-up.’ I stroke my beard, thinking I’d better give him the benefit of my wisdom. ‘Now listen, I’ve seen more of the world than you have...’

‘I’ve covered two hundred leagues just in the last ten days.’

‘All right, fine.’ (it’s a good point; I give him that) ‘So you probably have seen more of the world than me. OK. But the bits I have seen, I’ve seen for longer. And in all my years, do you know how often I’ve heard this spiel about how the world is about to end? Pretty damned often, I can tell you. And what happened? Well, take a look around; it’s still here.’

The barbarian decides to chip in. ‘There’s a dragon who’s been under the lake for centuries,’ he says. ‘If he wakes up, there’s going to be such a winter across the land that everything will die. On the other hand, if we go in that cavern and find all the orcs and kill them, it won’t happen.’

He knows how to muster a good argument, this barbarian. I have to admit that slaughtering a few more orcs would go a long way towards putting a better complexion on my day. While I’m ruminating on it, he gives me the clincher: ‘There might be treasure, too – silver and gold. Gems.’

‘All right, then, sonny,’ I tell the wizard, ‘you’ve got yourselves an ally.’

‘Good,’ he says with a smile.

‘You might use our names, dwarf,’ remarks the elf coolly.

Apparently the sorcerer concurs: ‘It would help to foster a climate of comradeship.’

‘Not meaning to be rude,’ I say (not worrying too much whether I am or not), ‘but you do all look quite alike to me. I don’t know how you can tell each other apart, without the

distinctness provided by a good growth of beard.'

'Eildonas has violet eyes; Asgrim is as big as a bear; some people think that I dress like a dandy. Do you think that this will help you differentiate?'

'You've given me some handy pointers there,' I admit. 'I'll make an effort.'

'You'll be able to distinguish us from the orcs, though?' says the elf dubiously.

'Of course. Orcs have longer teeth, for one thing.'

Asgrim, having lit one of the pinewood torches he carries, is now heading towards the cave mouth. In his other hand he carries his sword, and even now he's making impatient slashes at thin air. 'If we're all rested and ready,' he growls, 'let's go and hunt some orcs.'

As we hurry to follow, I spot a hip-flask that one of the orcs dropped during the fight. Hardly daring to hope, I pick it up, uncork it, give it a sniff

Oh joy! The fumes hit me like a sledgehammer between the eyes. You can usually count on orcs to carry something worth drinking. I take a swig, which shoots across my tongue like lava, and tears pop into my eyes as the stuff starts using my bloodstream for a sleigh run. Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice; enough of this orc brew and it could be both at once. Just to get my breath back, I have to pound a nearby boulder. With my head.

'Come along ... Anvil,' says the elf, pausing at the cave to look back. No-one can put disdain into their voice like an elf can.

I run to catch up. I'm about to throw the flask away, since even I could not take too much of this stuff, but then I decide to hold on to it.

After all, it might be the last drink I get.

5: THE FELLOWSHIP

Four companions descended down a narrow stairway into the bowels of the rock.

First came Asgrim, the warrior from the plains. Outside it had been bitterly cold, a climate he was accustomed to; but here a sullen heat rose from the depths, so Asgrim stripped off his coat of mail, revealing a strong sleek torso with muscles like coils of steel. He was still a young man, but already there was more strength in his frame than could be matched by any other warrior of his race. In one hand he gripped a broadsword. The other held a sputtering firebrand whose light cut a swathe through the blackness ahead. His grey eyes shone in the red torchlight, avid for glory.

Next was the dwarf, Anvil. He had no need of light – his eyes, like pools of jet, drinking in darkness – and he grinned fiercely as he walked into the subterranean vaults. He wore a long leather apron – marked by countless scorch-holes where gobbets of molten metal had splashed from his forge – and wielded a hammer and an axe. Though he was shorter than any man, few could have called him little, since he was more broad across the shoulders than an ox and his head was as big as a bushel-basket. His wide leonine face, sporting a thick beard, was so deeply seamed and expressive in its folds that it might have been a varnished wood-carving. It gave him the appearance of being a hundred-year-old mannikin. Except, of course, he was much older than that.

Fortunato the wizard was behind him. He had the heavy-lidded, full-lipped countenance of one who is used to indulgence and luxury. He had not seen much luxury in the past week, though, having hurtled across a storm-tossed sea, plunged through treetops, fought and killed a troll, trekked through forest, crossed wide tracts of grassland, scaled a mountain, and at last come to this

forbidding cavern at the roof of the world. His once fine robes now hung in grubby tatters, and his sole weapon was a twisted stick of ivy-wood. But many of his spells still remained to be used and, despite his look of fecklessness, Fortunato possessed hidden reserves of strength. He was keenly aware that his own frivolity had caused him to fail his aged master and his fellow adepts; now he was resolved to make amends, to come to their aid. He had sworn to prevent the demon Kyrax's reification even at the cost of his own life. The blue eyes narrowed, the full lips compressed tightly, and few of Fortunato's ne'er-do-well friends would have recognized him at that moment.

Last came Eildonas, creeping like a cat, hair as fine as spider-silk waving in the updraught, his eyes like distant stars. His shadow made as much noise on the stair as he did.

A huge door of black metal loomed ahead, opening on to a chasm like the maw of night. In front of it, neatly laid out on the stone floor, were two orcish bodies. Blood-crusted splinters of bone protruded from their broken skulls and splintered limbs.

Anvil bent to study them; this was handiwork he recognized. 'These are two of the orcs I killed earlier,' he told the others. 'But why drag the corpses this far and then abandon them? And where are the others?'

'Those who survive must mean to give their fallen comrades a heroic funeral,' said Asgrim with dour approval. 'Though they are our sworn foes, I respect them for that.'

Eildonas's smile flickered like a candle-flame in the gloom as he heard this. 'It's clear you know nothing of orcs, mortal. Heroism, respect and honour – those concepts are alien to them.'

Only Fortunato ignored the bodies, stepping past to stare beyond the iron door. The sound of dripping water echoed up to him. Fortunato got the impression of a vast gulf, and the current of warm air was more noticeable now. He raised his sleeve and whispered something to the little

bat who clung there. In response the bat flapped off into the dark beyond the door, returning soon after to emit a series of shrill squeaks.

Fortunato listened, then turned to his companions. 'Faustus says there is a deep cavern that goes down into the heart of the mountain. The orcs are not in evidence, nor are my master and the adepts. Still, they must have come this way.'

Asgrim lit another flambeau from the one he carried and handed it to Anvil.

'I don't need that,' complained the dwarf irritably, holding up his two weapons to show his hands were full. 'I can get by perfectly well in the dark.'

The barbarian glared at him. 'Not all of your companions can say the same, however, and we need more light than one torch gives out. Fortunato cannot carry one because his hands must be free for magic; Eildonas is disqualified because it would hamper his knack for stealth. Therefore—' he thrust the torch at Anvil, so that the dwarf was forced to take it in order to avoid singeing his beard '—you carry it.'

Anvil grumbled under his breath, but he hooked the pickaxe on to his belt and raised the blazing torch high over his head. Together they advanced to the doorway. A broad stairway stretched below them, plunging majestically into the depths. Each step was half the height of a man. Unlike the crudely hewn passage they had come along, these steps were fashioned of marble, cloudy mauve-blue in colour. The light gleamed on a smoothly polished surface under the cobwebbing of fine cracks.

'Excellent workmanship...' said Anvil in a voice like a gasp. 'Dwarven hands hewed those blocks, I'm sure.'

'You may be right,' said Fortunato as they descended, the echo of his voice rolling over the steps ahead and coming back with a clatter from the walls. 'I have heard that the Savants of the Hidden City, who slew Kyrax, sometimes enlisted the aid of dwarfs.'

The walls of the staircase dwindled into darkness above and below them, sheer stone flanks over which crawled wisps of steam. Through the steam, sparkling hoarfrost shone wetly. Rivulets of melting ice trickled down the steps underfoot.

'This stairwell may have been encased in ice for centuries,' remarked Eildonas in a tone of mild curiosity. 'What is making it thaw now, I wonder.'

'The breath of the waking dragon, of course, you faerie fool,' grunted Anvil.

Eildonas said nothing in reply, but it was surprising that Anvil failed to feel the sharp stare that was directed at his back. Fortunato noticed it though and, knowing how little love is lost between elves and dwarfs, was anxious to think of a way to ease the tension. It would not do to face Ghashlug and the orcs while quarrelling amongst themselves.

A soft but ominous sound broke in on his thoughts – a dragging footstep, followed by a ghastly groan. It came from close behind.

Asgrim, though at the front, was the first to react, whirling like a tiger, a snarl already forming on his lips as he raised his sword to confront a new foe. Then he froze, and for an instant his face went blank with horror. 'By all the gods...'

The others turned to see what sight could have dismayed even the mighty barbarian. All of them gave a shudder of sick fear. Advancing down the steps towards them were the two orc cadavers from the chamber above. Animated by noxious sorcery, their mouths hung slackly to reveal swollen tongues, and their rolling eyes were rimmed with gore. One had a sticky smear of brain-matter across his jowls and neck; the other's entrails hung like eels from his torn gut. Howling horribly, they swung their mattocks and bore down upon the four adventurers.

Eildonas recovered fastest from the shock. Bounding forward, he planted his hand on Anvil's head and vaulted

nimbly up, right above the sluggish cadavers, turning head over heels in the air to land on the step above them. The cadavers started to turn, their limbs moving leadenly, like puppets. Eildonas's strange sword darted out – a serpent's tongue, a shadow's flicker. One of the lifeless heads rolled, hitting the marble steps with a heavy crack.

Eildonas started to smile, then blanched as he saw that the decapitated orc was still shambling towards him, its weapon blindly scything the air. Again he lashed out with the sword. This time he pierced it through the heart, but the blade grated on a rib, stuck fast, and as the cadaver staggered back Eildonas had the hilt pulled out of his hand.

By now, the other cadaver had advanced into the melee. Its mattock was already poised to strike, descending towards the elf's face. Dropping with the weight of the orc's dead arm, the weapon was moving too swiftly for Eildonas to dodge. With his sword, he could have parried it easily. Disarmed, he was defenceless.

It was just at this moment that Anvil finally got his helmet off. It had got jammed down over his eyes when Eildonas used him as a vaulting-post, and he had been struggling to pull it back up. As he did, the first thing he saw was the sight of Eildonas about to get skewered by the cadaver's pick. Without hesitating, Anvil took the helmet he was holding and flung it at the cadaver's hand. It struck squarely and with some force, diverting the blow just enough for Eildonas to twist aside and roll back off the higher step to safety.

Asgrim charged past, sword sweeping the air in a shining arc, sparks streaming from the torch in his other hand, and flung himself on the cadaver with a thunderous battle-cry. Within seconds he had carved it into quarters. Meanwhile, Anvil was pounding the bones of the still-flailing corpse that Eildonas had beheaded. They used the torches to burn every gruesome remnant where it lay twitching on the steps.

Eildonas picked up Anvil's helmet and handed it back

to him, nodding curtly. 'A good hurl,' he said.

'We dwarfs are pretty keen on shot-putting, you know,' said Anvil as he donned the helmet once more.

They resumed their descent. Fortunato allowed himself a slight smile as he moved forward to join Asgrim. 'They might become staunch comrades yet,' he remarked to the barbarian.

Asgrim thought about this and nodded. His smile made him look like a hungry wolf. 'Battle breeds fellowship. There is no friend so firm as one who has fought beside you.'

Some time went by before the light of their torches showed the bottom of the great staircase. The melting frost had flowed down to form a pool of water inches deep. Here, flanking a long hall, stood two large valves of stone in the shape of giant snail-shells. Apparently these had been set as guardians, since there was evidence of them having extruded long limbs covered in barbs. They had been dealt with -either by Ghashlug's expedition or Matholem's. Fragments of shell lay strewn across the floor, and the hard chitinous tendrils were broken and limp.

There were also two dead orcs, face down in the water.

'Some of these wounds were inflicted after death,' announced Asgrim after crouching to investigate the bodies. He rolled them over. 'The hearts have been cut out.'

Fortunato took a look and grimaced. 'They're the other two that Anvil killed, I'll be bound. Removing the heart is a standard precaution against zombies. The Archimage's party must have been ambushed just as we were.'

'They seem to have avoided casualties,' Eildonas remarked. 'Up to this point, at least.'

Anvil had pressed on towards the far end of the chamber. Now he called the others over, gesturing to four passageways that led off from here. All four stretched off further than the torchlight could reach. 'Spoiled for choice,' he said laconically.

Eildonas leaned into each passage to taste the air. 'It's no use. They may have tried all these passages before

finding the right one; I can't find a distinct spoor.'

'What do we do now?' Asgrim gave a snort of exasperation.

Anvil shrugged as he looked from passage to passage. 'Each take one passage and regroup here in half an hour?'

'To split up now would be foolhardy,' declared Fortunato. 'Moreover, we have no time to waste. There must be a way.' He pressed his palms to his forehead. 'Think, Fortunato, think...'

'What about your familiar?' Asgrim suggested.

Struck by sudden inspiration, Fortunato clicked his fingers. 'I have a better idea — a spell that will not only point our way to Ghashlug and her servitors but will serve to chastise her at the same time.' He spoke for a few moments in a lilting arcane tongue. The others understood only the last words: '*O Fire of Wrath — Ghashlug the witch is my foe; find her and fash her!*'

A long lick of red flame uncurled from his fingers and went writhing like a living thing through the air. They watched it fly along one of the four passages and vanish out of sight.

'It will seek out the witch and injure her,' Fortunato explained. 'Unfortunately, the injury is unlikely to prove fatal.'

'At least we now know the quickest route,' said Asgrim, his voice booming back along the passage as he strode off. 'Come!'

Eildonas turned to Fortunato as they walked. A slight smile played over his lips. It might have been a smile of grudging esteem, but no mortal could say for sure. 'That was an artful use of the spell, Luck,' he said after a moment.

'Not luck but judgement,' said Fortunato, returning the smile.

The passage took several confusing turns, winding vagrantly down far into the mountain. The air became warmer, drenched with steam. The whisper of trickling water hissed along the walls. Each step they took caused

a damp splash. From time to time, the rustle of cracking ice could be heard from far ahead.

'This thaw is strange,' said Asgrim, his voice an uncharacteristic murmur. He disliked anything which held a hint of the unknown.

'Why should it not be the suspiration of Kyrax?' said Fortunato, recalling Anvil's words. 'He must be close to returning to the living world.'

Asgrim spat on the dank floor. 'Doesn't it seem strange to you,' he said, 'that a creature who means to provoke the Fimbulwinter should exhale a breath to melt ice?'

It was only then that Fortunato realized he had been entertaining the same doubts. 'Aye ... now that you mention it.'

This speculation was cut short by the emergence of the passage into a round chamber, whose rough and pitted walls gave it the appearance of a huge bubble in the rock of the mountain. Chunks of dark slush, remnants of the ice that must formerly have sheathed the walls, sat in wet mounds across the floor. A single corridor led on from here, triangular in cross-section like a long notch drilled in stone. It was supported by a central line of pillars but, rather than being fashioned, these seemed to be just stems of stone that had been left when the rest of the corridor was excavated.

'More dwarf work?' asked Eildonas, running a hand over the surface of the stone. 'It looks too crude . . .'

Anvil bent to give the architecture a disapproving scrutiny. 'It was tunnelled by magic, in my opinion. A shoddy way to build a labyrinth.'

'These deeper sections would have been manufactured in haste, remember,' said Fortunato as they made their way along the corridor. 'The Savant who felled Kyrax was anxious to obturate his heart.'

Sorcery seemed to swim thickly in the air, and in the face of this immemorial magic Nature held her breath. The four heroes felt that they were no longer inside the

mountain, but were now descending into a limbo between the worlds.

The walls were as black as oblivion, reflecting their torches as faint and impossibly distant scratches of dull blood-coloured light. At intervals, scorings in the rock showed murals that had been roughly daubed in shades of red, purple and gold. The long centuries had failed to eradicate them, the images still clearly showing a slumbering giant surrounded by the raised fiery tongues of a stylized holocaust. Fortunato shook his head at the sight, unable to fathom their meaning.

Finally the corridor came to an end. A stone plug stood in the floor against a blank wall, blocking entrance to a wellway.

After a long moment of silence, Eildonas said, 'Either we have come the wrong way, or there is some means of lifting that plug.'

A thick iron ring was set into the plug. Laying his sword against the wall, Asgrim set his hands on it and strained until his muscles showed like knotted ropes. His teeth were clenched in a look of savage determination. There was a grinding of stone and the plug lifted, but less than an inch. Dropping his own weapons, Anvil rushed forward and added his strength to the task. Despite his short stature, his arms were as thick as Asgrim's and had the toughness of iron that had been beaten on his forge.

Together, man and dwarf raised the plug barely far enough so that the familiar, Faustus, might have squeezed through. By dint of obdurate will, they held it there for several seconds, veins bulging with the strain. Then both gave a gasp and relaxed, and the plug sank back inexorably into place.

'How did the other groups shift it?' Eildonas said in a tone of wonder, as if thinking aloud.

'No mystery there,' said Anvil, leaning against the rear wall while he got his breath back. 'Simple mechanics. The orcs had ropes and poles amid their gear. If we could trick

up a way for all four of us to combine our efforts, it'd be easy to budge.'

Fortunato studied the plug, deep in thought. There obviously was not enough room for more than two of them to try at any one time. On the other hand – assuming that the orcs had managed to replace the plug after going through – the Archimage's party must have found another means of getting past it. Of a certainty, Matholem's way of doing things did not involve pulleys, ropes and other mechanical contrivances. He must have used a spell – but which one? There was a spell of the Earth elemental phylum that allowed the caster to move a short distance through solid rock. Most likely that would have been how Matholem and the adepts proceeded beyond this point. Fortunato could do the same, but that would mean leaving his companions here. He racked his brains for an alternative. Only one came to mind, and although Fortunato was loath to waste such a powerful spell it seemed he had no choice.

Raising his arms, he chanted the words of the spell. The antique syllables swum in the air like unseen faerie bubbles. Out of the deep silence that followed, a susurrations could be heard building in volume until it became a thunderous flat roar. Billows of inky smoke rushed into the chamber, swirling and coalescing under the direction of the spell. The others watched in amazement as a tall figure stepped out of the turbulence. Swarthy of skin, he wore a silk turban fastened with a ruby on his brow, and he was armoured in gold-lacquered pectoral plate, vambraces and kilt. For some reason that defied analysis, no-one present was able to focus on his lower body and legs. It was as if he were only half-real.

The genie had an imperious expression on his aquiline face, but he pressed his hands together in salaam and bowed low in front of Fortunato. 'The gods be with you, O Lord of Magnificence,' he intoned in a voice like the rumbling of boulders. 'How may I serve?'

Fortunato waved his hand: the haughty gesture of a nobleman vexed by trivialities. 'This block obstructs my progress. Remove it.'

The genie bowed again. 'Your wish is my command, O Jewel More Glorious than the Sun.'

At this, he flung up his arms and began to turn away. In the next moment he was gone, and in his place again stood the whirlwind of darkness that had presaged his coming. This uncanny transformation took place in the time taken for a blinking of the eye, and only Eildonas saw how it came about (for elves do not blink), but it is unlikely he will ever speak of it to anyone.

The whirlwind seethed across the floor, the heroes moving hastily back out of its path, and embraced the stone plug. Flickers of light snaked out of its centre, earthing themselves in sputtering sparks across the walls. There was a grating sound as the plug shifted. It wobbled like the lid of a boiling kettle, then was flung up by an invisible force. Asgrim and Anvil, whose muscles still burned with the exertion of moving the plug just a few inches, shook their heads in stupefaction at the sight of it hovering, apparently weightless, in the heart of the black whirlwind.

Eildonas darted over to the lip of the pit and looked down. 'A shaft, with handholds,' he announced over the ululating shriek of the wind.

'Hurry,' Fortunato urged. 'The spell only has a limited duration.'

They all climbed down into the shaft. Anvil was the last in. He snatched up his weapons, ran over on his short legs, and had just lowered himself down into the shaft when the magical whirlwind vanished. The end of Anvil's long beard was still draped over the edge of the pit. He yanked it back just before the stone plug dropped exactly into place with a loud and conclusive *clunk*.

Anvil looked up. The plug was clear of his head by less than an inch. 'I see what you mean,' he muttered.

The descent was arduous, each hand- and foothold no

more than a shallow notch in the wall. The warmth rose in a wave up the shaft, and steam hung like veils of lace in the air. Fortunato was soon soaked in sweat, and regretted not discarding his heavy cloak. He snatched a glance down to see how much further they had to go. Asgrim's burly shoulders blocked his view of the shaft, but Fortunato got a dizzying glimpse of dank walls dropping far away until obscured by the steam clouds.

Faustus had left his master's sleeve to flutter ahead. He returned, speaking in a manner that only Fortunato's ears could decipher, to report that the shaft continued for another hundred feet or so before bottoming out into a chamber.

They kept going. Fortunato's fingers began to weaken. His arms were trembling with the exertion, and his hair was now plastered into his eyes by sweat and steam. He felt as if he were boiling alive inside his clothes; each breath came as a sob of exhaustion. Two weeks ago, would he have had the stamina to endure such hardships? He doubted it. Everything else became stripped away, until he was aware of nothing but the walls of the shaft sliding past and the steady ringing of his comrades' boots on the stone rungs. He seemed to be in a trance, always just on the verge of losing his grip and surrendering to the terrible drop. An unknowable time, between an instant and eternity, trickled past. Fortunato hardly heard the squeaks of encouragement that Faustus was shrilling in his ear. His blood was pounding. An abrupt and unbidden image leapt with shocking clarity before his mind's eye: that sickening plunge he had taken out of the sky when the lunscales deserted him. Suddenly he was seized by the nightmarish notion that he never had survived that terrible fall, that all the events of the last two weeks – his meeting with Eildonas, Asgrim and Anvil, his battle with the troll and the steep climb through mountain snows – that all this had just been a feverish hallucination that had come to him in his last moments, as he lay broken and dying in the forest of

Athelorn.

The horrible idea sapped his last reserves of strength. His fingers lost their grip, and with a breathless cry he fell –

Asgrim caught him around the waist and lowered him the last couple of feet to the floor of the shaft. ‘Well done,’ said the barbarian. ‘I wasn’t sure you had the stamina for such a long climb.’

Fortunato removed his hat and smoothed back his hair; it gave him time to banish the grotesque fancies and steady his nerves. ‘Me?’ he replied with casual aplomb. ‘Oh, I’m much tougher than I look, my friend.’

The others joined them, Anvil grumbling pettishly about the long gaps between the rungs – ‘Nobody considers dwarfs when they build these things!’ – and Eildonas, as usual, sleekly silent. The shaft had brought them to another natural chamber. Through the boiling billows of mist, they saw three tunnels leading off.

‘Another quandary, like before,’ said Fortunato. ‘Only this time I have no spell to guide us.’

‘Probably all three lead to the same goal,’ said Anvil. ‘The only difference lies in what we must face between here and there.’ He pointed to inscriptions in the rock above each of the tunnels.

‘This one reads *The Path of Sciomachy*,’ translated Fortunato after poring over one of the inscriptions. He turned to another tunnel. ‘And this is *The Path of Tenebrosity*... and this, *The Path of Confrication*.’

‘What do they mean?’ asked Asgrim.

‘I have no idea. Perhaps they describe the impediments to be faced before reaching the chamber of Kyrax’s heart.’

‘No effort has been spared in making our task an easy one,’ Eildonas observed dryly.

‘Naturally not,’ said Fortunato. ‘The Savant’s first concern must have been to hinder those – such as Ghashlug and her acolytes – who strive for the demon’s resuscitation.’

‘Anyone got a coin with three faces?’ said Anvil matter-of-factly.

Asgrim spun a dagger on the floor. When it came to rest, the point was towards the first of the tunnels, the one marked with a legend denoting Sciomachy.

He got up, sheathing the dagger. ‘All-Father Eerg has guided us,’ he said.

‘Either him or stark, uncaring fate,’ rejoined Eildonas sceptically.

Asgrim shrugged. ‘They are the same.’ He strode into the tunnel.

It was narrow and dingy, and the flame of the torches sizzled in the damp air. The walls were blocks of roughly-hewn brown stone, like the walls of a dungeon. As the four companions advanced, a hush of premonition descended on them. Their footfalls sounded heavy and stifled, the fusted atmosphere muffling all reverberation. After some minutes, they saw a hard white glare burning in the darkness ahead. Eyes by now accustomed to gloom, they had to squint as they approached the light. Faustus again took refuge in his master’s sleeve. An open archway loomed, the silhouette of a raised portcullis showing above it against the light.

Something strange happened. Asgrim was in the lead, with Fortunato just behind him. As they approached the archway, the light momentarily flared up, becoming so intense as to be dazzling. Fortunato put up a hand to shield his eyes. As the light went out, he saw that Asgrim was gone. Now there was no arch, but a solid wall ahead. The only light was the ruddy glow from the firebrand Anvil was carrying. Disoriented, Fortunato came to an abrupt halt.

‘Oof!’ grumbled Anvil, bumping into him. ‘Why have you stopped?’

Fortunato turned and stared at him, almost too amazed to speak. ‘Asgrim’s disappeared...’

Anvil peered past him at the blank wall that confronted them. ‘Wasn’t there an opening up ahead just a few

moments ago?’

‘It’s here,’ Eildonas said.

They looked back to see him heading off down a side tunnel. A bar of strong light shone out of its mouth on to the floor. But Anvil and Fortunato had just passed that section of passage, and they knew there had been no side tunnel then. ‘Wait,’ called Anvil.

They hurried back to the turning, just in time to see Eildonas outlined against a block of white light. They started out after him, and then suddenly the light was extinguished. They faced a dead end, and Eildonas was nowhere to be seen.

‘Now, doesn’t this suggest magic to you?’ commented Anvil.

Fortunato nodded grimly. ‘We’re like rats in a maze, but we knew there’d be no turning back. The only thing to do is press on and hope we can rejoin the others.’

Not far off, they discovered another fork in the passage that had not been there before. As a precaution, Fortunato lit a taper from Anvil’s torch. Then they proceeded along the new tunnel, with Anvil in the lead. It came as no surprise when an arch came in view, seemingly opening into a brightly-lit room – nor when this arch abruptly vanished and in the glow of the taper Fortunato saw no sign of the dwarf.

Alone now, he stepped cautiously along yet another newly-appeared tunnel. A brilliant glare flooded into his face. Discarding the taper, he moved towards it. The light got brighter and brighter. Fortunato could see an archway, as before, with a portcullis suspended over it. Beyond lay a wide smoothly-paved room which shimmered like a mirage in the stark radiance.

‘Now, Faustus,’ said Fortunato to his familiar, ‘perhaps we’ll find out what happens when *we* disappear.’

But no such thing happened. Instead, as Fortunato drew near to the opening, the portcullis dropped with a sinister clang in front of him. Pressing his face to the bars,

he looked into the brightly-lit room beyond.

'Fortunato,' called out Anvil's gravelly voice. 'How did you get over there?'

Fortunato turned to see the dwarf standing in another archway, also sealed by a portcullis, that was some distance to his left around the perimeter of the room. The room itself was circular, with five passages leading off. Four of these were separated from the room by a closed portcullis; Fortunato was relieved to find that his comrades were all here, one behind each portcullis. The light blazed down from a glittering jewel set into the centre of the domed ceiling.

Eildonas nodded towards the fifth tunnel, the only one that stood open. 'That, presumably, is the route onwards.'

Fortunato set his hands on the bars of the portcullis in front of him and tested its weight. It might as well have been fixed into the roots of the mountain. 'Asgrim, can you..?'

'I've already tried,' said the barbarian, morosely shaking his head. 'It won't budge.'

'In that case,' Fortunato wondered out loud, 'how are we meant to proceed?'

Almost as though in answer to this, the portcullis in front of him shot open, moved by an unseen force. Fortunato took a tentative step out across the shiny marble floor. He could feel the heat of the floor even through the soles of his boots. Dryness and warmth gave the air a feeling like fine grit; it was akin to standing beside an oven. Overhead, the magical jewel burned like a second sun, bathing the whole chamber in its relentless glare. Fortunato squinted and averted his eyes, gazing at the only respite from the light in the whole room: the hard pool of shadow at his feet.

'Hurry over to the exit tunnel,' urged Anvil. 'Perhaps when you've crossed the room, one of the other gratings will be raised.'

Fortunato doubted if it would be that simple. He took

one pace towards the open passageway, then another, then another. With each step, his confidence grew. Perhaps, in expecting some kind of trouble, he was being needlessly pessimistic. The whole point of the Path of – what was it, Sciomachy? – might simply have been to test an adventurer's resolve. Perhaps just persisting this far without becoming discouraged was enough to pass the Savant's ancient challenge.

It was a scant hope, and soon dashed. Before Fortunato was even halfway across the room, an aura of palpable sorcery descended on him. The jewel in the ceiling flickered and shone still brighter, its radiance now taking on an actinic blueness. Fortunato's heart sank, even before the other's warning cries drew his attention to an eerie change that was coming over his shadow. As he stood frozen in dread, the shadow began to stir, quickening with fluid ripples under his feet. He felt like a traveller who, journeying through deep woodland at night, suddenly sees movement in the darkness and realizes that what he had mistaken for shadow is in fact a living thing.

The paralysis left him. He jumped back as a column of blackness gushed up into the air. Rearing to head height, it hung there for the space of a heartbeat and then broke apart into darkling motes like tattered patches of ash. The motes drifted away, evaporating in the light.

Fortunato gave a gasp of awe. Where the column of shadow had been, there now stood a strange figure.

He was clad in a cloak of intricately-woven fur and feathers. The fur was silver-grey, the feathers violet, blue and red, and patterned with ocelli, like a peacock's; Fortunato recognized these as pelt and plumage from the most fabulous of beasts, a gryphon. His tunic comprised iridescent firedrake scales sewn over shimmering white samite, caught in at the waist by a wide belt of gold-chased scarlet leather, from which hung a finely wrought dagger glittering with rubies. Under this: a silk shirt like a banner of blood, its sleeves cut in deep dags and bordered with gilt

filigree. Fortunato could only guess at the fabric of his hose, which shifted in colour before his eyes between sea-green and emerald. The stranger's face could not be seen, hidden as it was behind the visor of his fanciful head-dress, which took the form of a great bird of prey with dark red lenses for eyes.

He drew a breath raggedly, as though it were the first he had ever taken. Slowly and wonderingly he unfolded his arms, as if unfamiliar with the sensation of movement and exalting in the discovery. He raised his head. Only the lower part of his face was visible beneath the hawk mask; as he set eyes on Fortunato, his mouth curved into a sneer.

'Prepare yourself, brother,' he said, raising hands which already sparkled with burgeoning magic. 'It is your doom that you face.'

'But wait!' cried Fortunato, still trying to gather his wits in the face of this weird manifestation. 'Why is there any need for us to fight? You call me "brother"...'

'I am formed from your shadow. I am your dark twin. The other self that dwells deep in your unconscious, like a monster in a mere. Our death-struggle is ordained by destiny.'

He unleashed a blast of plasma towards Fortunato, briefly eclipsing even the light of the jewel above them.

Fortunato hastily countered with a spell which brought a gust of wind that blew him safely to one side, out of the path of the hurling fire-stream.

Retaliating, he conjured a miniature storm out of thin air, and his alter-ego was engulfed within a grey cloud that flickered to the retort of tiny thunderbolts.

'That seems to have ruffled your feathers, "brother",' said Fortunato as his opponent staggered back out of the tempest. 'Do you care to continue?'

'You weakling, do you understand nothing?' railed the other. 'This contest can only end in death.' As he spoke, one hand drew the jewelled dagger from his belt while the other formed a complex talismanic gesture that Fortunato

knew well – it was a spell of the Earth phylum, which gave the caster's skin the toughness of rock.

Fortunato stood his ground as his foe advanced. His gaze was locked on the golden blade, where the light glanced along its edge and seemed to hang like a deathly drop at the tip. He threw aside his ivy cudgel and spread his arms wide.

'So, you embrace death,' said the other with a wry laugh. He lunged.

Fortunato clapped his hands against his foe's forearm, pushing the direction of the blade outwards and twisting to one side as he did so. He knew from the instant of coldness, followed by a spreading sticky warmth, that the blade had nevertheless caught him in the stomach. He sank to the floor, pulling his enemy down above him.

A triumphant smile showed under the merciless stare of the mask. The stranger raised his dagger and he spoke almost tenderly, saying, 'Your struggle was in vain. No man can conquer the enemy within his own soul.' He stooped to deliver the death-blow.

'You are wrong,' said Fortunato with surprising vehemence. 'A hero can.'

His left hand shot out and tugged at the mask, shifting it so that his foe was momentarily blinded. At the same time, he drew the knife concealed in his boot, brought it up with all his strength, and sank it deep into the other's heart.

They remained transfixed together in that pose for several seconds – a bizarre tableau, each holding the other close with bloodied fingers. Dislodged, the hawk mask fell away. Their eyes met, and for an instant Fortunato stared into his own face. Then the shadow-twin faded like mist under a rising sun.

On faltering steps he continued across to the far side of the room, leaving bright spots of blood on the floor as he went. At the exit, he turned and looked back. He was trying not to sound shaken, but failed quite to keep a quaver out

of his voice as he said, 'Well – who's next?'

The portcullis in front of Anvil trundled up. 'It looks like me,' he said.

The dwarf took one step into the room and threw his war-hammer straight at the glowing jewel. It exploded silently in a blossom of luminosity, the shards going dark and slowly falling to land with a musical tinkling on the floor.

'Heroes like you can't ever do things the easy way,' he said to Fortunato with a broad grin.

As the light faded, so too did the portcullises. Eildonas and Asgrim came over to join them at the exit.

'You deprived me of my sport,' Asgrim growled reproachfully at the dwarf. 'I'd have relished closing in mortal combat with my own shadow-foe.'

Eildonas moved past them, a dismissive curl on his lips. 'There'll be other opportunities for violence,' he said. After a glance along the corridor that lay ahead, he turned to Fortunato. 'Are you able to go on?'

Fortunato took a moment to reply, as if struggling to surface out of a deep sleep. 'I'll manage . . .' he said thickly. The hand he held pressed to his midriff was scarlet with blood. He swayed on his feet, and hurriedly steadied himself against the wall.

There might have been a fleeting glint of emotion in Eildonas's violet eyes. He unhooked a silver hipflask from his belt, sang a few soft words over it, and offered it to Fortunato. The mage paused, then drank. It was the purest water he had ever tasted. Almost at once, the flow of blood was staunched and his pain began to subside.

'Faerie magic,' explained Eildonas as he took the flask back; 'more subtle than your mortal spells.'

'And very welcome, my friend,' said Fortunato, smiling.

They passed on out of the domed chamber, with Asgrim and Anvil once again in the lead. This corridor was wide enough for them to advance two abreast. Looking at their broad backs in front of him, and those weapons brandished

with strong arms, Fortunato almost felt a twinge of sympathy for the orcs. What would it be like to suddenly see Asgrim and Anvil rushing side-by-side out of the darkness to attack you, bellowing their battle-cries? Surely even the bravest orc would be struck nerveless with terror! For the first time in many days, Fortunato was in sanguine mood. They were almost at the end of their long journey now; he could sense it. Surely the four heroes would triumph, charging in at the eleventh hour to rescue the world? He looked forward to reuniting with aged Matholem and the six adepts of his order. Together they would face the orcs. Together they would overthrow Kyrax's acolytes and seal that dread demon in death.

He could not possibly guess then what a bitter twist Fate had prepared for him.

There was the creak of centuried hinges as Asgrim hauled open a door at the end of the tunnel. Steam belched out in hot heavy swathes. A vast hall stretched out before them. Filling the space between echoes was the sound of a hundred fountains: a damp whispering as water dripped from the high vaults of the roof into the pool flooding the floor. And there was another sound. It came from the far end of the hall., just audible against the backdrop caused by the thaw. The sound of voices.

Asgrim waded on into the hall. The water came halfway up his shins — well past the knees in Anvil's case. By now scenting battle, neither of them noticed. Fortunato would have wasted his time beseeching them to caution. The lust for combat was in their faces. All their thoughts were focused on the open doorway at the end of the hall. Fortunato shook his head almost regretfully. Ghashlug and her minions had no idea of the onslaught that was heading their way.

Eildonas caught Fortunato's sleeve and pointed to the floor. There, through the water, ran a thick rill of blood. Human blood. A sudden shock of sickening horror sent a chill to the pit of Fortunato's stomach.

They burst through the doors. It was a scene of slaughter.

Matholem and the adepts had clearly been caught in an ambush. Bronze shields emblazoned with gold flame-symbols hung all along the chamber walls, but many of these had been taken down and used to build a makeshift barricade. Apparently the orcs had crouched behind this barricade with crossbows and waited until Matholem and his adepts arrived, then butchered them in a volley of lethal shafts. Their bodies lay just inside the doorway. Some still wore expressions of blank surprise, death having taken them even before they were aware of any danger. A girl with short blonde hair was at Asgrim's feet. In life she must have been pretty. Now she looked like a waxwork, blood soaking into her robes around a crossbow-bolt buried deep in her heart. The barbarian looked down at her and shook his head sorrowfully. There was no glory in such an end. This was not what battle was supposed to be about.

Long sweeping scorch-marks across the walls attested that some of the adepts had lived long enough to retaliate with Fire magic, but the barricade must have protected the orcs from the brunt of this. A couple of them lay dead, their ugly faces burned to the bone where bronze shields had given way under the impact of a well-aimed fireball, but of Ghashlug and the remainder there was no sign.

Eildonas had not forgotten his earlier encounter with dead orcs. He loped across and took the precautions necessary to prevent the bodies from rising as zombies.

The flagstones ran with a wash of rich red blood. Fortunato fell to his knees, pushing his hands through it as if he could thereby undo the evil deed, force the lifeblood into the bodies of his friends where they lay.

There was a moan from amid the carnage. Everyone froze. A bearded old man in rune-patterned robes was struggling to raise himself on one elbow, despite half a dozen horrifying wounds. 'Master Matholem!' gasped Fortunato.

'Is that you, Fortunato..?' croaked the old man, peering

up as Fortunato cradled him in his arms. 'I have no healing magic.'

'Nor I, master,' sobbed Fortunato.

'It doesn't matter now. You have to stop them.'

Fortunato was in a daze of horror, and hardly heard him. 'I failed you, master. I should have been with you.'

'Not a bit of it, lad. Then you'd have died with us. This way you have a chance...' Matholem's every word cost him great effort, but he clung on to life by sheer force of will.

Fortunato bent closer to catch the fading words. 'What must I do?'

'The Savant knew this day would come . said Matholem. 'He condemned Kyrax to seven centuries under water that is like stone, seven under stone like fire. . .'

'What?' Fortunato wailed. 'What, master? I don't understand.'

Suddenly the dimming eyes snapped wide open, staring clear and true right into Fortunato's. '*Stone like fire*, Fortunato,' said Matholem in a strong voice. 'Don't fail me this time...'

Fortunato started to reply, but then he saw that the Archimage's gaze had turned to glass. He gently closed the unseeing eyes and lowered the frail old form to the floor.

Fortunato rose slowly to his feet. His face was ashen, almost devoid of expression, but something cold burned deep behind his eyes. Asgrim saw, and well recognized that grim light. He had seen it in innumerable blood-feuds during his time with the Valrings. It was the awful light of vengeance.

The room opened onto a balcony overlooking an immense cavern. It was from here that the sound of voices had carried back to them as they crossed the flooded antechamber. Eildonas darted forward in reconnaissance and then returned to report. The orcs were just ahead; even as he spoke, they were descending to the cavern floor.

Masking the light of their torches, the four stepped out to the balcony.

The sight was staggering in a manner that Eildonas's unflamboyant description had entirely failed to convey. The mist that filled the air drifted aside to reveal a dizzying panorama spread out around them. Obviously they were now in the very bowels of Mount Anger, but the sheer scale almost made them forget they were underground at all, giving the impression instead of being far down an alpine chasm in the dead of night. The walls of the cavern could have been the colossal flanks of the dragon that is said to engirdle the world; they rose up and up until the eye abandoned any attempt to see the cave roof, lost as it was in a murk of darkness and drizzling steam. Water streamed over the rock, gurgling down into sink-holes in the cavern floor which from time to time vented spurts of boiling water. The heat was almost chokingly dense.

The remaining orcs were visible, making their way down by means of a narrow ledge that sloped to the floor. The light of their lanterns just reached to the centre of the cavern where, about a hundred feet below the level of the balcony, stood a monolithic block of stone. If it was a sarcophagus, it could have been built for a giant. It seemed to be made of the same hard black rock as the mountain, and it had been sealed with three enormous chains. Two of the chains were broken.

The orcs stared at the block excitedly, gabbling in their harsh tongue. Ghashlug, leading the unholy procession, spoke, raising her voice above the others: 'Behold the sepulchre of our ice-locked liege! Only one of those shackles remains to be sundered, and then the White Lord will walk the earth once more. These hands shall break those loathly links — bathed as they are in the blood of our fallen foes.'

As she spoke, she raised her hands and the four heroes could clearly see — even in the wan light cast by the orcs' lamps — that they dripped with warm human blood. Then she gave a shrill laugh to harrow the soul, and her peals of vaunting glee rebounded in echo after echo around the far reaches of the cavern.

It was too much for Fortunato. He leaned out over the balcony and screamed: 'Turn, you gross hag! You celebrate too soon — your cowardly crime was incomplete, as here is one of those foes. I am hale and full of hate, so face me, witch!'

Ghashlug stared up through the steam-haze. As she caught sight of Fortunato, she bared her teeth in a grin so wide that it almost seemed her head must split in two. 'Another young hedge-wizard!' she cackled. 'And this one comes accompanied by gadlings — including that irksome dwarf, I see.'

'Laugh all you like, witch,' said Anvil, stepping forward next to Fortunato. 'These are the last minutes of your venomous existence, because if Fortunato doesn't kill you then I certainly will.'

Her laughter settled to a soft jeer. 'How is it that one taste of my sorcery wasn't enough to forewarn you, dwarf? You seek a further demonstration? Then mark this!'

The other orcs flattened themselves against the back of the ledge, horribly aware that their mistress would make no allowance for any of her minions who strayed into the line of fire. Ghashlug flung out her hands, spewing out a stream of sounds that twisted the fabric of space in front of her. The steam-clouds were sucked into a vortex as a stream of invisible force leapt across the distance between the witch and her foes. Fortunato and Anvil felt themselves seized, jolted off their feet by her spell. They were powerless to resist as she drew them to her through the air and set them down among the ranks of her orcs.

'You two,' called Ghashlug to the others, who were still on the balcony. 'I've more important things to deal with than you, so I'll give you a choice. Leave now, go back the way you came. If you stay, we'll kill you too.'

Asgrim gave a snort of derision and started down the ledge towards them. 'I would not count my life of the least worth if I were to abandon a sworn comrade,' he said. 'Nor have I raised my sword at any time — save once — without

a willingness to see my foes dead.'

There was something frighteningly inexorable about the barbarian's measured tread as he descended the ledge. Even though he was still a hundred paces away, the nearest of the orc warriors hefted their weapons in sweaty hands and shuffled nervously into position to face him.

'Elf,' hissed Ghashlug anxiously, her grin curdling on her sallow face, 'I know you faerie folk; you'll not tarry if your life is at risk.'

'I'm these three's ally,' Eildonas said veritably. 'As an ally, I do not desert them.' He raised his bow and necked on an arrow.

With a metallic scraping sound, the orcs nearest to Ghashlug pulled sharp falchions from their scabbards. Anvil planted his feet squarely on the ledge and made ready to fight them. The deep black nuggets of his eyes watched them warily, and out of the corner of his mouth he asked Fortunato, 'Have you many spells left?'

'All too few,' confessed the young mage. 'I have one to inspire bravery, one to pass through solid walls, and one to strengthen the skin against weapons.'

'I'll take the last of those you mention, then, if you've no other use for it,' muttered the dwarf, still staring hard at his foes.

Fortunato recited the words of the spell just as one of the orcs made his lunge. Anvil's loam-brown flesh took on a grey tint. The orc was evidently a more skilful warrior than most; his blade whirred over Anvil's guard and struck him full in the face. Instead of the expected gout of dwarfish blood, however, there was a dull snap as the falchion broke against his spell-hardened skin.

The orc stared at the broken falchion in his hand. Before he could retreat, Anvil's pickaxe sliced up and impaled him through the heart. He fell groping at the fountain of blood pumping from his chest, face still vacant with astonishment at the failure to kill his foe.

That death served as a signal. The long moment of

tension erupted into a blur of mayhem. Orcs charged at Anvil, emitting growls that sounded more desperate than ferocious. The sturdy dwarf parried to left and right, sparks flying where weapons glanced off each other, clanging notes ringing out as metal clashed on metal. He caught one of his foes in the knee with the point of the pickaxe. The orc groaned and began to keel over. Throwing his weight to one side to avoid another's blow, Anvil positioned himself so that the toppling orc fell across his back. Then, straightening up with all his might, he propelled his victim off the side of the ledge to his doom.

Another orc came in against him. This one never got close enough to strike. He was speared through the neck by a shaft from Eildonas's bow, slumping with a gasp to expire at Anvil's feet. Anvil threw the elf a grateful glance before flinging himself once more into the thick of battle.

Meanwhile, Asgrim was bearing down on the orcish rearguard. Several had tried to winch their crossbows for a volley, but panic-stricken haste meant that only two of them got the chance to shoot. One flight missed the barbarian altogether and the other, though it tore a gaping wound in his muscle-slabbed shoulder, only served to enrage him further. He strode in among the orcs with a battle-cry like the pealing of thunder. The great grey sword rose and fell like a scythe, scattering bloodied limbs, and a grisly howl could now be heard from the anguished orcs. Never had they faced such foes as these!

Ghashlug greeted the turn in events with sour equanimity, certain that her sorcery was sufficient for victory. She had never expected her acolytes to survive, in any case – her intention all along having been to sacrifice them to Kyrax for his sustenance.

But Kyrax would doubtless batten more zestfully on the vigour of the four heroes, and all would be well in the end. Now her beady gaze fixed on the young mortal wizard. He was the immediate cause of this setback. She would deal with him first.

Green fire swirled around Ghashlug's gore-drenched hands. Her lips peeled back in a grisly grin as she took aim.

'Now you die,' she said, the green flare underlighting her face and giving her features an even more frightful cast.

'Fie, a banal slogan,' Fortunato retorted with apparent unconcern. 'I challenge you to do your worst.'

Hearing this, Ghashlug gave a spiteful screech and the jet of green fire shot from her fingers. At just the same time, a tiny winged shape went soaring up from the folds of Fortunato's sleeve. Ghashlug's concentration was torn between the mage and his familiar, and her eldritch flames went wild, playing across the cavern wall and singeing one of the orcs standing nearby so that he dropped his sword. Anvil was quick to take advantage of the distraction; the orc got no chance to retrieve his weapon.

'Just a bat!' scoffed Ghashlug. 'I'll deal with it later.' Regaining control of her spell, she sent another blast of energy at Fortunato. But the delay had given him time to employ magic of his own. Now he dived to the ground – no, *through* the ground, as if plunging into water – and the green fire spat harmlessly into the rock where he had been standing.

Fortunato swum down inside the cavern wall, emerging on the floor below as his spell expired. Glancing up through the pall of mist, he saw Ghashlug staring briskly all around, keen to discover where her foe had fled to.

He raced over to the sarcophagus. The rock under his feet was as hot as a kiln. The sarcophagus towered above him, a brooding block of chiselled basalt; at close quarters the aura of menace was almost tangible. His gaze fell on the three chains that the Savant had used to seal it. Each was thicker than his waist. Two of the chains had been broken, their giant links blackened and melted as if by acid. One chain yet remained secure – the one that Ghashlug had journeyed here to break.

Then Fortunato noticed something. Each of the chains was secured by a massive silver padlock. Each padlock

bore an engraving in the shape of a flame.

Suddenly he knew what the Savant had planned those long centuries ago. He was sure of it.

Fortunato glanced back up to the ledge. Asgrim and Anvil stood together now, hewing and hacking at their foes. The lamps cast a tangled shadow-play against the wall. Only three orc warriors still stood, and those three were retreating steadily before the heroes' fury. Behind them waited the witch, however, and Fortunato knew that his companions could not withstand her sorcery.

'Asgrim! Anvil! Eildonas!' he shouted at the top of his lungs. 'To me!'

They looked towards the voice and caught sight of him down on the cavern floor. It was Asgrim who was the first to act. Locking blades with an orc, he bunched down into the struggle like a bull and pushed him hard away. The orc went staggering back off-balance. Before he could return to the fight, Asgrim had plunged over the side of the ledge and was scrambling down to where Fortunato was waiting. Anvil followed a moment later, half running and half tumbling down the steep slope. Higher up on the balcony, Eildonas sent a last shaft winging towards the orcs and then uncoiled a length of cord from his belt. Like a spider on its web, he slid down to join his companions.

They rallied beside the giant sarcophagus. Ghashlug and her remaining warriors glared down at them from the ledge.

'You fools,' hissed the witch, 'you've made yourselves sitting targets for my magic. How ironic that you die there, in the shadow of Lord Kyrax's prison.' Vicious red sparks started to flicker around her hands as she began a guttural chant.

'I hope you have a plan,' Anvil muttered to Fortunato.

'We must join hands on the third padlock,' urged Fortunato. 'Quickly! Together we shall undo it.'

Asgrim responded at once, unquestioning, placing his huge hand over Fortunato's on the lock. In matters of magic

he trusted entirely to his comrade's judgement.

The others were less sure. 'Undo it? But won't that free the demon?' protested Anvil. He looked uneasily up to the ledge, where red spell-light made Ghashlug look like a figure of burning blood.

'The Savant knew that evil cannot be buried away for ever – it must be brought forth, faced and conquered,' said Fortunato hurriedly. 'The other chains were snapped by evildoing, but we shall unlock the last with the force of good.'

Shrugging, Anvil joined his hand with the others'. Ghashlug uttered a mad shriek and raised her arms to hurl the fireball. Eildonas gazed up at her with an inscrutable expression and then reached to place his hand, too, on the lock. 'Why not?' he said.

A tension hung in the air. For an instant, it was as though time stood still. Tongues of red light gouted up along the cavern walls, sending Ghashlug's long shadow down over the cavern floor. Pale glints of lantern-light shone on the faces of the orcs as they clustered along the ledge – jackals eager to see a kill. And under the gaze of their foes stood the four staunch heroes, hands joined together in hope on the last of the locks sealing the sarcophagus.

It began with a rumbling that could be heard through the rock – a deep ponderous boom far down in the depths of the earth. Then cracks began to spread across the floor, giving glimpses of incandescent lava which now began to seethe up from below. There was the furious hot screech of steam being driven through the gaping chasms. The cavern shook, and chunks of rock rained down from the roof.

Ghashlug, thrown off her feet, pitched forward from the ledge. She gave a thin scream as the red fireball exploded out of control, engulfing her and her minions. They howled and burned, dying in a capering dance of agony, while she rolled down to the cavern floor, a wailing swirl of cinders

and black smoke.

Fortunato and the others moved away from the sarcophagus as it began to vibrate. The lid was thrust up by a sudden and unbelievable force from within. They had a glimpse of an eerie blue glow inside, and drapes of frosty air escaped to pour down the hard blank flanks.

'Look!' shouted Eildonas in warning.

They scattered as a torrent of molten rock plunged down into the centre of the cavern, completely engulfing the sarcophagus in a bubbling red-hot mass.

An inhuman roar ripped the air, louder than a thunderclap, drowning out even the deep grinding of ruptured rock. In that sound was a fury and torment beyond mortal understanding. It rose to a hideous crescendo, echoing back off the quaking walls, then was abruptly cut off.

Only Fortunato paused to look back at the sarcophagus as it split apart inside the lava torrent. He knew that he would take the scene he saw then to his grave.

With splashes of lava fizzing down all around them, they headed towards the ledge. Then a loud crack jerked their eyes up to the balcony. As they watched, it crumbled away from the wall and fell. Lava, flooding in as the cavern began to split apart, slid relentlessly across the breaking ledge, dashing any hope of escape.

Fortunato turned to the others and spread his hands in resignation. 'This is victory, my friends. We knew it might cost us our lives.'

'The witch,' growled Asgrim, pointing. 'She's still alive.'

Ghashlug stood about thirty paces away, clothes blackened and smoking, while a geyser of fiery rock spurted from a trench in the floor behind her. She had hauled something from the lice-ridden backpack she carried. It seemed to be a large empty travelling bag, made of rough cloth patterned in a faded tartan. As they watched in amazement, she set this on the ground in front of her and opened it.

Fortunato could almost have laughed. 'She has become unhinged,.' he said.

She suddenly looked up. Her face was a burned and bloody ruin, her matted hair smouldering, but the little deep-set eyes still glittered with malice. So chilling was the look in those eyes that for a moment she seemed to be trying to slay the four Heroes by a mere act of will. Then, uttering an inarticulate cry, she started to get into the bag.

'What on earth—?' said Asgrim.

'It's a Journey Bag,' realized Eildonas. 'She's getting away!'

As they raced forward, the witch disappeared deeper into the opening of the bag. They saw her sink until only her head was still visible, grinning now as she thought to leave her foes to their fate. Vanishing into the bag – which continued to lie flat on the ground as though empty – she reached up to snatch the handles and pull the bag through, inside-out, behind her.

Asgrim swept his sword. There was a stream of dark blood, a cry that seemed to come from far off, and the hand fell severed nearby.

They reached the bag and peered down into it. It appeared to contain an infinite black void, in which there was no longer any sign of Ghashlug.

'Where does it lead?' muttered Asgrim dubiously. 'A different place every time,' said Eildonas.

The cavern was falling in around their heads.

Dodging a rivulet of lava, Anvil yelled, 'Anywhere's better than here! Come on.'

With hands linked in a chain, they stepped into the Journey Bag. Fortunato was the last. As he went through, he remembered to draw the handles after him. His last sight was of a cascade of liquid rock falling from the cavern roof directly towards him. Then the Journey Bag snapped shut, and he was falling with the others through silent darkness...

...They dropped back into the real world on a snow-covered mountainside. Mount Anger was several miles away, roaring fire and rock up into the skies. The witch was nowhere to be seen. Given the vagaries of the magical bag, she could have been on another mountainside – or on the far edge of the world. Fortunato, at least, was not anxious to confront her again right now.

‘The dragon Kyrax seems to have suffered a rude awakening,’ said Asgrim as he watched the volcanic eruption. He was shivering in the chill wind, but he was smiling. Fortunato handed him his travelling-cloak, which the barbarian accepted with a nod of thanks.

Eildonas could be counted on to add a sobering thought: ‘Seven centuries in ice, now seven centuries in rock ... It’s a long time to nurture a grudge. When he gets free at last, his anger will know no bounds.’

‘And seven centuries from now, will there be any group of heroes ready to oppose him?’ wondered Anvil.

‘We must hope there will be,’ said Fortunato, clasping each of his comrades by the arm. ‘For, my friends, it is hope that makes men into heroes.’

THE END

In The Night Season

an adventure game

In an ordinary adventure game, you take the role of a single adventurer. This one is something different. *Heroquest* features a fellowship of four adventurers (Wizard, Elf, Barbarian and Dwarf) and each has different skills. If you are playing this adventure solo, you can take the part of all four adventurers. Alternatively, find some friends who also have copies of the book. Each of you can then adopt the role of one of the fellowship.

RULES OF THE ADVENTURE

Characteristics

Each adventurer has four characteristics:

BODY measures the amount of physical injury the adventurer can endure. Keep track of each adventurer's BODY score, which will vary as he or she is wounded. If BODY is ever reduced to zero, the adventurer is dead. Lost BODY points can be healed by magical means, but no spell will ever take an adventurer's BODY score above its initial level.

MIND represents an adventurer's mental and psychic resilience. A high score indicates a person who is well able to withstand hostile sorcery. Keep track of each adventurer's MIND score, and if it ever reaches zero the adventurer has died of shock.

COMBAT indicates the adventurer's ability to fight. This usually remains the same throughout the adventure, but can be changed by possession of magical weapons, etc. Having your COMBAT score reduced to zero is unlikely to occur, and does *not* indicate death.

SPEED is an indicator of dexterity and reflexes as well as movement rate. An adventurer whose SPEED is

reduced to zero is unable to proceed; his companions must either go on without him, or abandon their quest.

Initial values for each of the four characteristics are already given on the Character Sheets for the four possible adventurers (see artwork pages following this section). Permission is granted for the character sheets to be photocopied for your use whilst playing *In the Night Season*.

Roles

The four adventuring roles are Wizard, Elf, Barbarian and Dwarf.

The **WIZARD** is pre-eminent in sorcery, but weak in combat.

The **ELF** is an all-rounder, having some spells as well as moderate fighting skill.

The **BARBARIAN** is a great warrior, but has no other powers and is vulnerable to magic.

The **DWARF** is strong in battle, and also has an uncanny knack for spotting traps and secret doors.

Your team of heroes in the game comprises one of each of these types.

Battle Order

It is important to know your adventurers' battle order at all times. This is the order in which they advance to battle. The adventurer in the front row (usually the Barbarian or the Dwarf) will often bear the brunt of attacks. Adventurers can change position in the battle order at any time except *during a fight*. If you are playing with friends and cannot agree on the battle order at any point, use the following order: Barbarian, Dwarf, Elf, then Wizard.

Fighting

When a battle is commenced, it takes place in *rounds*. Every round, you get an attempt to strike an opponent whom you're fighting. To succeed, you must roll *equal to or less than* your COMBAT score on one dice. (For instance, if you have a COMBAT score of 4 then you'll need to roll 1-4 on the dice to hit your foe.)

If you succeed in scoring a hit, this inflicts the loss of one BODY point. Your enemy will also get the chance each round to strike back at you, of course (you must roll the dice for them), and any blow that they land will cost *you* one BODY point. If a character's BODY points reach zero, remember, that means death.

When you encounter a *group* of foes, you will be told whether there is room for every player to get involved in the fight. Assuming there is, multiple foes will pair themselves off against you according to your battle order. (For example, if you are attacked by three orcs then they will engage the first, second and third players in the battle order; the fourth player can either join in the fight on an orc of his choice, or else stand back and cast spells from a safe distance.)

If there are *more* opponents than players, the allocation goes round again from the top (e.g. five orcs versus four players would mean that the first player in the battle order ended up fighting two at once).

It is only possible to make *one* COMBAT roll per round of the battle, regardless of how many opponents you are fighting. If a monster finds itself fighting two or more players at once, it will make its attack each round against the player who is furthest forward in the battle order.

Parrying

Instead of attacking in any given round, you can try to parry. You must decide this at the very start of the round, before any other player or monster has acted.

To parry, you need to roll a 1 or 2 on the dice (the chance

is the same for all character types). A successful parry negates *one blow* struck against you in that round. Monsters *never* parry; it is an option only for players.

Fleeing

Sometimes you will be given the option of fleeing from a battle. This might seem unheroic, but many dangerous creatures abound, and discretion is sometimes the better part of valour. If you choose to flee, the adventurers in the front and second row of the battle order must try to roll their SPEED or less on one dice. Failure means that the adventurer loses one BODY point before getting away.

Encumbrance

There is a limit to the number of items each adventurer can carry: three in the case of the Barbarian and the Dwarf, two for the Wizard and the Elf. If you come across an item when you are already at your limit, you will have to discard something to make room for it. Note that each adventurer starts off with a weapon (already noted on the character sheets), and if this is lost he or she must deduct one point from COMBAT. The Dwarf also already has some money.

Spells

Only the Wizard and the Elf are able to use spells. The spells they know are listed on their Character Sheets, and can be used in any battle *instead* of attacking. When a spell is cast, cross it off the list – it cannot be used again during that adventure. (Spells are not items and so do not affect Encumbrance.)

HEAL BODY

Restores four BODY points to any one adventurer. It cannot increase the adventurer's BODY points above their initial score, and does not work on an adventurer who is already dead (i.e. who has zero BODY).

ROCK SKIN

Cast on a single adventurer at the start of a battle, this halves the injuries the adventurer takes in that battle. Round fractions in the character's favour (e.g. if he would normally lose 3 BODY points, he only loses 1).

PASS THROUGH ROCK

This enables the caster to move through a solid wall. You can try casting it at any time. When you do, refer to the list here to find out what happens:

If you are at **108**, turn to **17**

If you are at **130**, turn to **7**

If you are at **111**, turn to **48**

(If the entry number you are currently at is not listed here, the spell is cast to no effect.)

GENIE

A magical servitor is summoned for a brief time. He can be commanded to do one of the following:

- Restore one point that an adventurer has lost from any characteristic.
- Inflict one point of BODY damage on a foe.
- Foretell the future: you can take a look at one entry option in advance, before making a choice what to do. Of course a Genie can usually open doors but within this particular game, the doors you could encounter are magically sealed to prevent a Genie's interference.

SWIFT WIND

This doubles one character's SPEED score for a single roll. Alternatively, it can be used to let the whole party flee without any risk of injury as they do so.

TEMPEST

A localized storm envelops your enemies, causing them to lose their chance to act for one round. This affects

all the enemies in a given fight.

FIRE OF WRATH

This seeks out a single enemy and inflicts two points of BODY damage. (It does not travel in a straight line but will divert to find a safe path around your companions. This can be an advantage in some situations.)

BALL OF FLAME

This strikes all the enemies facing you in a given fight. Each gets a chance to avoid damage by rolling 1 or 2 on a dice. If this roll fails, the spell inflicts one point of BODY damage.

COURAGE

Cast at the start of a fight, this increases a single adventurer's COMBAT score by 1 for the duration of the fight. However, that character will then be unable to flee and must fight on to the death. (So if the rest of the party later choose to flee, they must leave him behind!)

SLEEP

A foe can be put to sleep. It does not always work, however. When you decide to cast it, refer to the list here.

If you are at **16**, turn to **64**

If you are at **77**, turn to **81**

If you are at **5**, turn to **103**

(If the entry number you are currently at is not listed here, the spell is expended to no effect.)

WATER OF HEALING

Restores four BODY points to any one adventurer, up to the limit set by his initial score. It cannot be cast in

the thick of battle, and does *not* work on an adventurer whose BODY score has already reached zero.

VEIL OF MIST

This allows the caster to become partially invisible. Cast it at the start of a fight. Any time you are liable to be hit during the fight, roll a dice and on a score of 1-3 your opponent missed because of being unable to see you clearly.

The BARBARIAN

<i>BODY</i>	8
<i>MIND</i>	2
<i>COMBAT</i>	5
<i>SPEED</i>	3

*Position
in battle order*
(CIRCLE ONE)

1st

2nd

3rd

4th

ITEMS CARRIED

- 1 *bastard sword*
- 2
- 3

The DWARF

<i>BODY</i>	7
<i>MIND</i>	3
<i>COMBAT</i>	4
<i>SPEED</i>	2

*Position
in battle order*
(CIRCLE ONE)

1st

2nd

3rd

4th

ITEMS CARRIED

- 1 battleaxe*
- 2 money pouch (20 silver pieces)*
- 3*

The WIZARD

<i>BODY</i>	4
<i>MIND</i>	6
<i>COMBAT</i>	3
<i>SPEED</i>	3

*Position
in battle order*
(CIRCLE ONE)

1st

2nd

3rd

4th

ITEMS CARRIED

1 *dagger*

2

Spells

Heal Body *Tempest* *Ball of Flame*

Rock Skin *Swift Wind* *Courage*

Pass thro' Rock *Genie* *Fire of Wrath*

The ELF

<i>BODY</i>	6
<i>MIND</i>	4
<i>COMBAT</i>	4
<i>SPEED</i>	4

*Position
in battle order*
(CIRCLE ONE)

1st

2nd

3rd

4th

ITEMS CARRIED

1 *Sword*

2

Spells

Sleep
Water of Healing
Veil of Mist



1

Your travels have brought the four of you to Knochlor, an eldritch country beyond Blackfire Pass. It was from west of this wild wasteland of fells and fens that, in ancient times, the King of the Dead sent his legions against the living. Fortunately he was defeated by heroes of that bygone era. There are those who say he lies buried at the heart of one of the granite tors that you can see thrusting up from the barren moorland.

You turn away from the window, preferring the cheery warmth of the inn to the bleak moonlit landscape outside. As you sup your ale, however, you cannot help noticing how quiet it is in the taproom. None of the locals seems at all curious about you, even though it must be rare for them to meet people from more than a few miles away. Rather than ask you about your adventures, they just sit in silence staring morosely into their mugs.

The door bangs open and, entering along with the cold and autumn's dead leaves, comes a tall old man in a shag coat. He forces the door closed against the rush of night wind and then crosses the taproom to converse in low whispers with the landlord and some of the elders. From the sighs and grim shakes of the head, you deduce that some very weighty matter is being discussed.

Eventually the tall fellow fetches a cup of mulled ale and brings it over to stand by the fire. He looks chilled to the bone, and deeply worried.

If you ask him what's going on, turn to **4**

If you decide to mind your own business, turn to **15**

2

Your comrade does not return with the branch. Suddenly you are seized with a feeling of dread. You stare out into the mist. Almost magically, it rolls away to reveal a treacherous expanse of quagmire. There is no sign of your comrade. But then you see a single bubble break the surface of the mud, and your poor friend's fate becomes horribly obvious.

You round on the trow, but he and his fire have completely vanished. With a shudder of horror for your lost comrade, the remaining three of you get to your feet and proceed in a downcast mood.

Turn to **69**

3

You try to make them see the futility of their struggle. 'Look at the castle around you: it is just a weed-covered ruin. Whatever calamity befell your people, it must have happened long ago. You are nothing more than shades; possibly your great passion for honour has kept you duelling here night after night for centuries.'

They both gaze ahead as before, but now a look of sadness softens their fierce stares. 'Aye,' says one with a forlorn groan, 'it is the truth . . .'

The other stands swaying, seeming to see a swirl of images in his mind's eye. 'We died with our troops,' he sighs. 'Only wounded pride has kept our spirits tied to earth for so long.'

They are fading in front of your eyes, turning to phantoms in the faint moonlight and finally vanishing altogether. A bizarre and poignant episode. As you make your way out of the ruins, a shaft of moonlight descends from a break in the clouds to illuminate one of the arches in the castle wall.

If you clear the undergrowth away and look into the arch, turn to **25**

If you prefer to get back to the path, turn to **69**

4

At your invitation, he eases himself on to a stool beside your table and introduces himself as Douse the Glim, a local wise man. 'In my younger days I used to sort out messes o' trouble hereabouts,' he tells you. 'These days the old bones creak too much, though.'

'So what's all the commotion about tonight?'

‘Oh, a bad business, and that’s the truth,’ he says solemnly. He gives his cup a lugubrious look and then adds, ‘Have you noticed what a poor lonely sight an empty ale-mug makes?’

If you buy him another mug of ale (the dwarf must agree to this since it’s his or her money), turn to **26**

If not, turn to **37**

5

As soon as you emerge into the wan moonlight, you see a horrible change come over the sword. It now looks like a green serpent, rigid as a poker, with its jaws clamped over the wielder’s hand. The wielder realizes that he/she cannot put it down, and any attempt to force the serpent to let go just causes it to bite down even harder. The affected player must reduce COMBAT by 2 and cannot use any other weapon until and unless the serpent is disposed of.

Taking this setback with poor grace, you slog sullenly back to the road.

Turn to **69**

6

You step into the dilapidated entrance hall. Your first impression is of cobwebs and dust. The second impression is less favourable. Rats, startled by your arrival, emit frantic squeaks and go scuttling half-glimpsed into the darkness.

You gaze up the long sweep of the stairs. Under the grime of ages, a succession of nefarious faces glower from portraits on the walls. Each looks more depraved than the one before, until finally your eyes come to rest on what must be the likeness of Grim Dugald himself. You cannot even begin to imagine what twisted desires and rank indulgences could have formed those gross features – the hot jowls, the obscene smile and the stare brimming with cruel delight. If the Devil wore a human face, that would be it.

You tear your gaze away despite a horrified fascination. Off to one side, below the stairs, steps lead down to the cellar. At the back of the hall is an archway. On the lintel over this is displayed Dugald's coat-of-arms: a raised fist in scarlet, bearing a flail, on an ebon field.

If you go up the stairs, turn to **39**

If you go through the archway, turn to **51**

If you descend to the cellar, turn to **62**

7

An ordinary mortal might be helpless in this situation, but as a wizard you have your sorcery to fall back on. Uttering the words of the spell, you drift like a ghost through the stone walls of the cubicle and soon find your way back to the study, where you rejoin your waiting companions, if any. (If more than one player was trapped by the demon, the other must be left behind in the cubicle, since PASS THROUGH ROCK only affects one person.)

You are careful to give the demon-possessed mirror a wide berth. You can now go back out to the entrance hall, and either take a look up the stairs (turn to **39**) or descend to the cellar (turn to **62**)

8

'No luck for you today, my friend,' is the demon's insolent reply to your demand. The first player in the battle order vanishes into thin air, just as the other player did earlier.

If there are any players left, there is nothing for it but to continue with the quest as best you can –take a look in the cellar by turning to **62**

If the mirror-demon has now despatched everyone in the party, turn to **130**

9

The demon complies. Every player who is currently below their initial BODY score regains one BODY point.

Now, since the demon is looking ever more dubious by

the second, you had better get out while the going is good.

Turn to **122**

10

You unstopper the phial and splash its contents into Grim Dugald's face. He gives a bestial roar and staggers back, crashing into the wall with an impact that makes the whole building shudder. As he lowers his hands from his face, you see that where the droplets touched him there are now gaps of nothingness where you can see right through to the wall behind him. The water has not burned him, it has simply *erased* him in places, like a painting wiped over with turpentine. The effect is weirder than anything you could have imagined.

Turn to **123**, but note that when you come to fight Grim Dugald you can subtract 2 from his COMBAT score because of the holy water.

11

Reversing your grip on the sword's inlaid hilt, you spear it down into the breast of the reviving corpse. Dugald shudders as though struck by lightning, and gives vent to a long howl of torment, so horrible that you have to turn away and cover your ears.

Suddenly the howl is cut off, leaving a gulf of ringing silence. You look back, perhaps dreading what you might behold, but the monstrous body has entirely vanished. All that is left is Wraithreaver, quivering upright with an inch of its point embedded in the floorboards.

Turn to **32**

12

You make your way out across the moors. The moon shows as a white gleam behind heavy shutters of cloud. Looking ahead, you can see three possible routes. One is a stone lich-way that passes by a number of ancient burial mounds. The second — used by carts heading to and from

market — leads over the moors to the town of Ithyorn; it skirts a ruined castle which many believe is haunted. Alternatively, you could take the path that winds through the misty hollows.

If you take the lich-way, turn to **23**

If you prefer to try the cart-track, turn to **34**

If you plump for the path through the hollows, turn to **45**

13

Which of these will you try:

A length of rope? Turn to **58**

An oak staff? Turn to **70**

If you have neither item, there is nothing for it but to go back and find the trow who got your friend in this predicament — turn to **24**

14

Much to your surprise, neither of them appreciates your interference.

‘Do you suppose I need the opinion of a stranger to champion me?’ demands the knight you have spoken up for.

‘It is no business of anyone else!’ the other snorts at you, pointing his sword in a menacing way. ‘This matter is for the two of us to settle, according to proper custom.’

You do not like the way they are looking. Every drop of the poisonous hatred that moments ago seethed between them is now directed at you.

If you are willing to fight them, turn to **36**

If you retreat and return to the path, turn to **47**

15

Some adventurers you are. If you have not even got the gumption to get involved when you see there’s something wrong, how do you ever expect to be heroes? Obviously you would rather just stay by the comfort of the hearth with your beer. Perhaps later on in the evening you’ll be so

daring as to risk a game or two of darts? It's clear that you are not cut out for swashbuckling, and so your adventure ends here before it's even begun.

16

Inside sits a wizened little spriggan with black briars for limbs and eyes like pips. It is squatting inside the mouldered rib-cage of the tomb's occupant, glaring furiously at you and wagging its thorny tail like a cat. Suddenly it leaps at the throat of whoever took the sword. This player must fight it alone, since it is too close to him/her for any of the others to risk taking a swipe.

SPRIGGAN: COMBAT 5 BODY 1

There is no way to flee.

If the spriggan kills the player with the sword, turn to **27**

If you kill it, turn to **38**

17

Using the spell, the wizard slips through the wall and unbars the door so that the other adventurers can enter. (Don't forget to erase the PASS THROUGH ROCK spell from your list.)

Now turn to **6**

18

By means of its magic, the mirror-demon has either atomized your poor friend or consigned him/her to a hidden oubliette. You must try to effect a rescue! But how..?

If you want to try using an item, turn to **29**

If you confront the demon and demand your friend's return, turn to **40**

If you smash the mirror, turn to **52**

19

Holding the portrait up in front of you, you advance towards the mirror.

The demon peers out, blinks, furrows its brow in

thought. After a pause it says, 'Hello, master. What can I do for you?'

'Restore anyone you have spirited away in the last half-hour,' you tell it. You try your best to disguise your voice – making it deep and gravelly, and bellowing the words in an irascible way. Even so, the demon looks puzzled, and peers again out of the glass mistrustfully.

You decide to stick to your bluff. 'Get on with it!'

'Oh, oh, oh! At once, master,' it quails.

It waves its hand, undoing its evil spell, and your lost friend(s) return from thin air to rejoin you. Flushed with success, you consider giving the demon further orders. The only danger is, you might be pushing your luck too far.

If you decide it isn't worth the risk, turn to **122**

If you try giving the demon an order, turn to **132**

20

The demon obeys. The wizard and the elf (if both are still with the party) each regain one spell that they have used previously. You can now use this spell again during the adventure.

The demon looks puzzled by your request. Stupid as it is, it will surely figure out you are not its master at any minute. You decide against risking further orders.

Turn to **122**

21

You had heard that Grim Dugald died thirty years ago. Is he now a vampire? Who can say? The realm of the supernatural spurns such glib classifications. But certainly he seems to shrink back from the garlic flowers as you thrust them towards him.

Turn to **123**, but note that when you fight Grim Dugald you can subtract one from his COMBAT score to represent the distraction caused by the garlic.

22

Using one of your weapons, you slice the staff obliquely through the middle and then sharpen one half to a crude point. Grim Dugald's eyes snap open, lambent with rage; his limbs jerk as though galvanized. But, before he can rise, you put the sharpened stake to use in the approved manner — and that is the end of Grim Dugald at last.

Turn to **32**

23

The lich-way is a path of old flints — now more than half sunk in turf — that was used by ancient tribes carrying the bodies of dead chieftains to their burial-ground.

Sure enough, before very long you can see a number of low mounds to the side of the track. These are where the ancient chieftains lie buried. Passing close by one of the mounds, you see that the jagged stones that seal the entrance have sagged outwards. With a little digging it should be possible to break through to the tunnel leading to the central tomb-chamber.

If you spend a little time excavating the mound, turn to **71**

If you are keen to press on, turn to **69**

24

You retrace your steps quickly to find the trow rocking back and forth in silent laughter. As he hears your footfalls in the mud, he looks up sharply and his expression changes to one of blind hatred. He jumps to his feet and starts to dart off into the fog, moving surprisingly fast on his spindly bow legs.

Whoever is currently at the front (i.e. the second player in the battle order, since the first is wallowing in the marsh) should roll one dice: if they score less than or equal to their SPEED, turn to **35**; if they score more than their SPEED, turn to **46**.

25

It gives on to a small chamber. As your eyes adjust to the gloom, you can just make out a metallic gleam coming from a stone table. Advancing, you discover a magnificent jewelled breastplate. It has the ornate style often found in war-harnesses of antiquity.

A player who wears the breastplate gets to roll a dice any time he or she is wounded in combat. On a roll of 1 or 2, the breastplate blocks the blow and no BODY points are lost. However, the breastplate is quite cumbersome and will reduce the player's SPEED score by one point while worn.

After deciding who gets this valuable item, you retrace your steps and continue across the moors. Turn to **69**

26

'Ah, 'tis true gentlefolk you are,' says Douse as you call the landlord over to fill his cup. (The dwarf should cross off one silver piece.) After he has taken a thirsty swig, he starts to tell you the tale: 'It is the poor milk-maid, Perdita, from the village, you see. She has been spirited away, and there's no doubt she'll have been taken to the old manse that lies far out over the moor. It was the home of Grim Dugald, as black-hearted a devil as ever wore a man's face, and since his death not a soul has been there and come back to tell of it. Now it's the haunt of goblins and dead things.'

'Surely the villagers will band together and attempt a rescue?'

He shakes his head and sighs. 'On any other night, perhaps, we might reckon on a handful who are brave enough. But this is Samhain Eve, when the unseen folk go abroad on the moors and work all manner of wild witchery. No one dares venture out tonight – and in the morning, no doubt, poor Perdita will be found cold and dead in a ditch.'

If you resolve to go to the haunted manse and rescue the maid, turn to **49**

If you prefer to keep to the safety of the inn, turn to **15**

27

Before you can stop it, the spriggan darts off along the tunnel shrieking curses. The rest of you stoop sorrowfully over the body of your fallen comrade, but he/she is beyond help now. If someone else wishes to take the strange sword they can do so.

If you search the sarcophagus, turn to **38**

If you leave the barrow right now, turn to **5** if you take the sword with you and to **69** if you leave it here

28

The colourless figures just disappear like mist, leaving only the distant echo of their lament on the wind that blows across the moor. Dogged by a feeling of unease because you know that the appearance of banshees is supposed to presage death, you hasten across to the far side of the moat and a beam of moonlight suddenly reveals a deep shadow in the wall of the moat.

Turn to **119**

29

Which item will you use:

A bottle of ink? Turn to **63**

A sprig of garlic? Turn to **75**

A phial of holy water? Turn to **87**

If you do not have any of these, or if the item you were intending to use is not on this list, then turn to **98**

30

It surprises you that Grim Dugald, if he still exists, has not drained his cellar dry by now, since he has obviously not restocked it in thirty years. Perhaps he no longer drinks wine.

You uncork a bottle of white wine, the red being rather too turbid for drinking at this temperature. It is pale yellow in colour, like autumn sunlight, and has a rich fruity aroma. The taste fills the palate, heady fumes rising to

whelm your senses in a swirl of pure pleasure. Sweet nectar! You refill your goblet eagerly.

The dwarf and the barbarian are both well able to hold their drink. The same is not necessarily true of the elf and the wizard, however, and if these players are in the party they will need to roll a dice to see how they are affected: the number rolled is the amount by which they must reduce their SPEED owing to intoxication. Remember that anyone whose SPEED reaches zero must be left behind.

If anyone is capable of proceeding, turn to **41**

If all surviving members of the party are unable to go on, turn to **88**

31

'I treat your whims as my commands,' it says, sending forth a sword of burnished blue steel out of the mirror. Moonstone panels gleam along the hilt, and it has a cabochon sapphire for a pommel. 'The sword Wraithreaver,' announces the demon.

Anyone can take Wraithreaver — but remember that you can only fight with one weapon at a time. Now turn to **122**

32

You have seen to the final dissolution of Grim Dugald's spectre. Now you can justifiably turn your attention to his treasure. Your eyes alight on a large chest beside the front door. It wasn't there when you came in, so presumably Dugald was just in the act of dragging it somewhere when you ascended from the cellar. You go over and take a look at it. There is a large padlock, but fortuitously Dugald has left the key in this.

If you open the chest, turn to **44**

If you're not interested in material reward, you may as well return to the village; turn to **113**

33

The water has an astonishing effect when you pour it over

the twitching corpse: it literally *washes it out of reality*. Wherever the drops land, it is like rubbing out a pencil sketch — a void appears in Grim Dugald's body and you can see right through to the bare floorboards underneath.

As realization of his fate dawns on the reviving vampire, he gives vent to a macabre howl and rolls his eyes in terror. But you harden your heart against pity, for his acts of evil deserve no other reparation. You continue to trickle the holy water over him until he has entirely vanished, with only a patch of damp on the wooden boards to show where he lay.

Turn to **32**

34

The track meanders beside a low stone wall choked with vines. It takes you past tangled meadows and under the looming shape of the local gibbet. You are thankful for the thick clouds that hide the moon, sparing you more than a glimpse of the gibbet's mouldering occupant. No sooner have you thought this than a moonbeam shines starkly through a rent in the cloud. You catch a momentary gleam of a ravaged face, its lips eaten down to a ghastly white grin, and hurry past with a shudder.

Eventually you catch sight of the castle atop the rise of a hill — a jagged shadow against the grey light of the moon. A sound comes down to you on the wind. Could it be the clash of steel, faintly ringing from inside the ruined keep?

If you go up to the castle to investigate, turn to **82**

If you pass by incuriously, turn to **69**

35

Mustering a burst of speed, you reach out and lay your hands on the trow's crooked shoulders before he can lose you in the mist. You lift the little monster up and he wriggles like a speared fish in your grip, but you are careful not to let him struggle free. Tucking him under one arm, you return to your stricken friend and explain that unless

the trow gets him/her free, you will wring his scrawny neck. The trow listens to all this in glowering silence, but at last he gives a single sullen nod.

You know that creatures of faerie cannot break a promise made while held fast, so you feel safe releasing him now. He dances out over the quagmire, which for some reason does not drag him down. Grabbing a fistful of your friend's hair, he hauls him/ her up out of the mud with remarkable strength and returns to the dry ground. Then, after flinging your mud-covered friend at your feet, and still without uttering a sound, he goes leaping and bounding away until swallowed up by the mist.

Reflecting ruefully on your narrow scrape, you head on across the moors.

Turn to **69**

36

'A truce, Oben?' says one knight to the other.

'Agreed, Herab,' says his erstwhile foe, 'until these interfering pests have been driven off.'

They are seasoned warriors, and cunningly make a stand between a pair of crumbling buttresses so as to prevent more than the front two members of your party from fighting them at once. The first and second players in the battle order must each select an opponent:

SIR OBEN: COMBAT 5 BODY 6

SIR HERAB: COMBAT 5 BODY 6

If you defeat them, turn to **59**

If you decide to flee, make the requisite SPEED rolls and then turn to **47**

37

He goes on peering into his cup for a while, then drains the dregs and says, 'Have you not heard the legend of the old manse? I'll tell it you: Grim Dugald lived there, a man with a soul as squalid as an adder's. When he died at last, not a soul as would venture within half a mile of the place, but

those that did were never seen on this earth afterwards! Bogles, shees and fritlings are but the least of the hobgoblins that abide there now. Why would anyone even think to try their luck, you ask? Why, because of Dugald's treasure, of course! His cask of gold was heavier than his cask of silver, and his cask of rubies was heavier still than that. Rich pickings for anyone not afraid of a bit of danger, and that's as true as I say it.'

You reflect on all this. Certainly you could do with some coins to fill your sagging purse.

Turn to **49**

38

Glancing into the sarcophagus, you are pleased to discover a gold arm-ring on one of the skeleton's arms. You can snap it free without effort, the bones having become as brittle as burnt twigs over the centuries. Remember to note the arm-ring down if you keep it.

You leave the barrow and continue on your quest by turning to **5** if you take the strange sword with you, or to **69** if you leave it here

39

Brushing aside the heavy drapes of cobweb, you give Dugald's portrait a wry glance as you tread slowly past it up the stairs. Each step gives an ominous creak as you advance, however, and it is soon obvious that the wood is quite rotten. Exploration of the upper floors would be too dangerous – you would most likely be killed by a collapsing floor if some unspeakable ghoul didn't jump out on you first. Gingerly retracing your steps, you again find your gaze drawn to the sinister portrait. If for any reason you want to take it down from the wall and carry it with you, turn to **74**

Otherwise, if you have not already done so, you can now go through the arch at the back of the hall (turn to **51**) or investigate the cellars (turn to **62**)

40

The new first player in the battle order steps staunchly forth, declaring, 'Restore my companion, you tittering devil!'

As before, the demon peers short-sightedly out of the dim depths of the glass. It scrutinizes you for a few moments. Then it wags its finger and says in tones of slow-witted relish, 'No luck for you today, my friend.'

Poof – well, no; with no sound at all, actually – the player vanishes.

If any players remain in the room with the mirror, they can now either smash it (turn to **52**) or try using an item (turn to **29**).

If the two players who have vanished were the only ones surviving, turn to **130**

41

You go deep down into the earth. Finally you emerge from the tunnel in a cave so vast that you cannot see the walls or roof at all. A torch glimmers in a bracket on the wall beside you. If there are any mortal players left (i.e. the wizard and the barbarian) then you *must* take the torch as otherwise they will be unable to see. You will have to retain it while in the catacombs as long as the barbarian and the wizard survive. (The elf and the dwarf have good enough night-vision not to need torchlight.)

Now turn to **53**

42

Even as you approach the coffin, you smell the slaughterhouse stench rising from it. It is filled with blood – and you can only pray it is not human blood. What vile monster would keep such a grisly thing here? With a shudder, you at last begin to guess the truth.

On the altar at the base of the coffin is a large bronze key. You decide that this is certainly worth taking: record it on someone's character sheet, even if something else must be discarded in order to carry it.

If you have a phial of holy water and want to use it now, turn to **54**

If you set out in the boat again, turn to **111**

43

Grim Dugald towers up over you, more monstrous even than in life. He will kill you if he can for trespassing in his manse, and you must fight now as never before.

GRIM DUGALD: COMBAT 5 BODY 10

There is room for up to three players to fight him at one time (a fourth player could of course cast spells at him, if any). The sword Wraithreaver, if you have it, will inflict *double damage* on him — i.e. two points per blow instead of one.

If *you* flee out of the manse, turn to **67**

If you succeed in overcoming him, turn to **78**

44

If the dwarf is still with the party, turn to **56**

If not, turn to **68**

45

You have not gone much further before beginning to regret your choice. The terrain is soggy underfoot, and even though you stick to the low dyke of drier ground that seems to mark the path, your boots are soon waterlogged. As if that were not bad enough, the mist thickens and swirls around you. Visibility drops until even your comrades around you appear like ghosts. You trudge on, the wet squelch of your tread muffled by the fog, until you catch sight of a campfire.

If you strike out in the direction of the fire, turn to **57**

If you ignore it and go past, turn to **69**

46

Fast as you are, the hairy little trow is faster. He streaks off into the mist and is lost to view. With hearts full of

dread, you try to make your way back to your friend. But there is now nothing to be seen except a blank surface of boggy ground, broken from time to time by a forlorn bubble of marsh gas.

Depleted now to only three, you head sadly onwards across the moor, grieving for your friend who died such a sudden and pointless death.

Turn to **69**

47

'Run, then, you craven dogs,' snarls one. 'May heaven blight you for your cowardice!'

The knight's curse falls upon you like a pall. Even as you flee from the haunted ruins, you know that the accusation of cowardice will linger with you for a long time to come. Each player must attempt to roll equal to or less than their MIND score on one dice; anyone who fails loses one MIND point.

With the ghostly knights' taunts ringing in your ears, you hurtle down the hillside and along the road, not halting until the ruined castle is in the distance far behind.

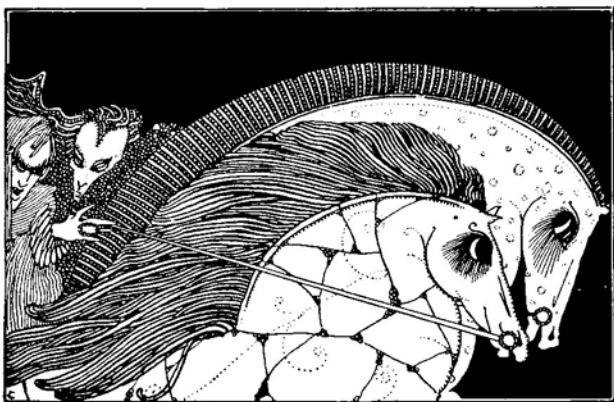
Turn to **69**

48

You drift through the closed door like a ghost. Inside is a girl. As soon as she lays eyes on you, she screams and cowers in fright. You try to soothe her, explaining that you are no foul phantom but simply a wizard who would like to help her. Then you realize you cannot help her – at least, not by magic. The PASS THROUGH ROCK spell only affects you. You float ethereally back through the door before the spell wears off and leaves you trapped, too.

If you have the bronze key and wish to use it, turn to **77**

If not, turn to **66**



49

‘We’ll do it!’ you cry. ‘We’ll go to the old manse this very night.’

Your announcement is greeted by the other villagers with the sort of enthusiasm they might give to someone who had just declared themselves to be carrying the Black Death. They stare at you slack-jawed, then hastily set down their mugs and set off home. As each of them passes your table to get his coat from the pegs by the door, he gives you a grave look and crosses himself before scurrying out.

Just as you are heading out of the inn, you bump into a pedlar who is parking his hand-cart outside.

If you stop to talk to him, turn to **60**

If you hurry past and head out to the moors, turn to **12**

50

It is like trying to grab a polecat with its tail on fire. With an angry whirr of fangs, claws and spikes, it breaks free and dashes off down the tunnel. Its shrieks and curses are horrible to hear – and it has also inflicted a number of nasty gashes on the player who caught it. This player loses one BODY point.

Now turn to **61**

51

You proceed over to the arch. Cobwebs, heavy with an accumulation of dust, hang across it like mouldy fabric. Grimacing in distaste, you brush them aside and hold your breath while the dust subsides.

Beyond the arch, you can now see a room which may once have been a study. There is a desk covered with yellow scraps of parchment, on top of which rests a quill pen. You also see several books. On the wall behind the desk hangs a dark oval mirror in a tarnished frame.

If you take a look at the desk, turn to **86**

If you go over for a closer look at the mirror, turn to **97**

If you have not yet gone upstairs and wish to do so now, turn to **39**

If you want to descend into the cellars, turn to **62**

52

As you swing at the mirror, the demon's eyes pop open in alarm and it ducks. There is a shivering crash as the mirror shatters into dozens of shards. This act of vandalism may mean that you will now have seven years' bad luck, but you find that is a strangely comforting thought – at least it would guarantee your surviving to see tomorrow's sunrise.

Unfortunately it does nothing to restore any player who was lost. The remainder of the party will just have to soldier on without them. Reasoning that the noise of breaking glass will have alerted anyone lurking upstairs, you decide to head down to the cellar.

Turn to **62**

53

You reach the edge of a subterranean lake, but the water and your surroundings are so silent and black that you almost seem to be in a void. You see only the white stone quay underfoot, the gleam of torchlight on the still water, and a white-lacquered rowboat tethered to a bollard on the quay.

If anyone wants to drink some of the lake water, decide who will do so and then turn to **65**

If you get into the boat and start rowing, turn to **76**

54

You empty the contents of the phial into the thick red mass. There is no perceptible effect, but you are convinced that this will make things difficult for the coffin's owner, whom you suspect of having an aversion to holy water. (Remember to cross the item off the character sheet now you have used it.)

All players should record the code-word CARFAX on their character sheets.

There is nothing else for you to do here, so you return to the boat and continue across the underground lake.

Turn to **111**

55

Grim Dugald was a monster even when he was alive—but the weaknesses of the flesh have been stripped away, and he is now nothing but the quintessence of evil. Looking into his ghastly corpse-lit eyes, you know that you can never expect quarter from such a foe. This is a fight to the finish.

GRIM DUGALD: COMBAT 6 BODY 18

There is room for up to three players to fight him at one time (a fourth player could of course cast spells at him, if any). If you have acquired the sword Wraithreaver, it inflicts *double damage* on this foe—that is, two points per blow rather than one.

If you flee out of the manse, turn to **67**

If you succeed in overcoming Grim Dugald, surviving characters turn to **78**

56

The dwarf, by virtue of long familiarity with intricate mechanisms, immediately spots a trap. This comprises a hidden spring-loaded needle—almost certainly coated in

poison — built into the hasp of the chest. Once detected, the trap is easily disarmed, and you open the chest to discover a lavish hoard of gold, silver and precious gems. You draw your breath in awe as the torchlight sparkles on this prize and reflects lustrously back into your eyes. To the victors, as they say, go the spoils.

If you've rescued the girl, Perdita, turn to **79**

If Perdita is not with you, turn to **91**

57

As you get closer, emerging out of the mist, you see a wizened old trow squatting beside a sputtering peat fire. He looks up and greets your approach with a brusque nod. Under the floppy brim of his hat, his eyes glitter darkly like droplets of tar.

A while passes, then he gestures for you to sit down and share the warmth of his fire. The acrid smoke stings your eyes and for a moment you have the wild fancy that this trow's fire is the source of the thick mist. But of course that is nonsense.

You do not know much about trows, since they are elusive beings. Folklore does suggest it is unwise to decline a trow's hospitality, but makes no attempt to reconcile this with the equally strong belief that one should have nothing whatsoever to do with them.

If you sit down by the fire, turn to **80**

If you turn his offer down, turn to **92**

58

You fling the rope across the quagmire, getting it close to your companion's hand on the third cast. By now he/she has sunk almost to the shoulders. It is like trying to pull a tree-stump out of the ground, and the other three of you have to tug on the rope with all your might. Slowly, with a viscid sucking noise, the mud releases its grip and you haul your friend over to the safety of the higher ground.

When you have recovered from the close call, you try to

find your way back to the fire. You would like to have words with the little trickster. But there is no sign of either him or the fire. You decide to head on and try to get out of the dank marshland as quickly as possible.

Turn to **69**

59

One moment your swords are striking at solid opponents — the harsh clanging of steel and the impact of blows is all too real. But then, lunging in with the death-blow, your weapons pass right through them. You stare aghast as their bodies dissolve into mist.

‘Ah!’ gasps one. ‘I had forgot: we are not living men.’

The other’s voice hangs on the night wind, just faintly audible, even after they have vanished. ‘You are right, my friend. All these years, these nights of fighting, we were but prideful ghosts...’

You cannot avoid a twinge of pity for the two knights. They were tragic figures, those two who so jealously disputed honour even beyond the grave. You are in a wistful mood as you quit the ruined castle, almost failing to notice the creeper-covered arch in the wall nearby.

If you take a closer look at the arch, turn to **25**

If you prefer to get back to the path, turn to **69**



60

He has just arrived at the inn, having dawdled somewhat in setting out this morning from the last village where he was staying. His route brought him over the moors, and he has spent the last few hours travelling in gathering darkness. He has a drawn, pale look about him — like someone who has seen a fearful sight — and is obviously keen to get himself a warm drink. He is reluctant to waste time talking to you, so decide carefully what you will say to him:

If you ask what he saw out on the moors, turn to **72**

If you ask him the best route to the old manse, turn to **84**

If you ask him what he has for sale on his cart, turn to **95**

61

The spriggan escapes down the tunnel, chittering a series of scalp-tingling curses as it goes.

If you now investigate the sarcophagus, turn to **38**

If you are ready to leave the barrow, will you take the strange sword (in which case turn to **5**), or leave it here (turn to **69**)?

62

Rickety steps lead down to a cellar whose frowsty dust-filled air almost makes you choke. You advance between racks of wine-bottles whose labels date back over many years. You notice one vintage, reclining under a thick gathering of grime, of over a century ago. If you wish to take one of the bottles of wine, remember to record it on your character sheet.

You find a door at the back of the cellar. Beyond lies a sloping passage that seems to lead down into still deeper catacombs. The darkness returns your gaze, heavy with foreboding. But it is down there, no doubt, that you will face your destiny.

Before entering the ominous passage, however, you glance back along the wine-racks. You might never again

get the chance to visit such a well-stocked cellar. Perhaps there is time to sample just a few goblets of one of the rarer vintages?

If you tarry awhile to see what the wine is like, turn to **30**

If you think you'd better not lose any time, descend to the catacombs by turning to **41**

63

You try flinging the ink over the mirror, figuring that if the image of the demon is obscured then perhaps its enchantments will be broken. You hear it give an angry snarl as the blot of ink covers the glass, but other than this there is no effect. Your lost friend does not reappear. The best you can do now is honour his/her memory by continuing with the quest. You turn and head towards the cellar door, vowing that all the foul fiends that dwell in this haunted manse will pay for what happened to your friend.

Remembering to cross the ink off your character sheet, turn to **62**

64

The spriggan curls up into a spiny ball and starts snoring contentedly. At least, you assume it is contented; it actually sounds like someone sawing a warthog in half.

Turn to **38**

65

The black water has a strange effect. If you are currently injured, your BODY score is restored to normal. If you were not injured, though, then you lose one point from your BODY score – and this is a permanent loss.

There is no way to go from here other than to climb into the boat and start rowing.

Turn to **76**

66

There is nowhere else to go here apart from through the door, so you row back to the other side of the lake in the hope of finding a key. You retrace your steps through the cellar.

You emerge into the entrance hall, then freeze. You are not alone here now.

Turn to **89**

67

Gasping for breath, you chase in blind panic across the moors. Cold moonlight paints a maelstrom of wild fells, sucking hollows and stunted trees, all of which hurtle past in a blur. Then, as you stagger up the side of a hillock, the distant blare of a hunting-horn echoes out of the distance behind you, and you hear the horrible baying of phantom hounds at your heels.

If the pedlar told you how he got away from Dugald's hunt, turn to **90**

Otherwise, turn to **101**

68

The first player feels a stinging sensation as he/she heaves the chest open. It is really no more than a pinprick, and at first you pay it no heed because you are absorbed in the splendid sight of piles of gold, silver and jewels heaped within the chest. But then a wave of nausea washes aside your avarice, and you realize that the act of lifting the lid caused a concealed needle to stab you on the hand. The needle carried a swift and lethal poison. The first player sways, topples, and is dead before he/she hits the floor.

If any other players still survive, turn to **79** if the girl Perdita is with you, or to **91** if she is not.

69

At last you arrive at the deserted manse of the infamous Grim Dugald. You have already had as harrowing a night

as any you can remember just in crossing the bleak moors, but your perils are far from over yet. You look at the darkened manse with its high gables, gaping window-sockets and shroud of ivy, and a feeling of foreboding makes you shudder to your core. Still, you will not make things any better by hanging around out here; you may as well get things over with. If only you knew what the 'things' in question were...

Cautiously you advance along the path until you reach the edge of a wide trench that surrounds the manse like a moat. There is no water in it, but the dim moonlight brims it with shadows.

There is a kind of bridge spanning this moat. It is not like any bridge you ever saw before, however, since it is made up of thick square tiles of pale marble which hover magically in the air without supports. The tiles are about two paces on a side and are close enough for you to easily jump between them. You notice they are furry with grey mould that also hangs raggedly down towards the moat.

If you cross by means of the hovering tiles, turn to **73**

If you descend into the dry moat, turn to **85**

70

You push the staff out towards your friend's outstretched hand. Your friend takes hold of it and manages, with tremendous effort born of desperation, to pull free of the quagmire and drag himself/ herself to safety beside you. Unfortunately the staff gets pushed down into the mud by these exertions and, by the time your friend is out of danger, it is impossible to extricate it. You watch the staff sink out of sight with only scant regret — it might have proved useful later, after all, but you would rather lose a simple item of equipment than a boon companion.

Cross the staff off your list of belongings. Now, you retrace your path with angry strides to the spot where you encountered the trow. You intended to deal with him for his morbid prank, but both he and his murky fire have

vanished as though they had never been. Since revenge is impossible, you resolve to head on out of the dangerous marsh as quickly as you can.

Turn to **69**

71

Digging away the stones with your bare hands is harder work than you thought, and soon you are sweating despite the chill night air. But after half an hour you have finally cleared enough of a gap to squeeze through.

You peer into the interior of the mound. Facing you is a long dark tunnel, too low for a man to stand upright. There is no smell of decay, of course — these mounds have not been used in almost a thousand years — but there is a dank earthy odour like soil after a storm.

If you go ahead and enter the mound, turn to **83**

If you are now having second thoughts, turn to **94**

72

‘A ghastly thing,’ he replies in a trembling voice. ‘First I heard the notes of a hunting horn. But who would be out at the chase on Samhain Eve, I thought, with not even a clear sky full of moonlight to light their way? Then I heard what I took for the baying of hounds — but an unearthly sound it was, like howls of wind heard in the chimney. At last I saw them, a horrible sight to make your blood run to ice. The hounds came in a pack, all headless with their barks howling through the gory holes of their necks. The beaters were capering hellions with the hindquarters of goats and faces that could clot cream. And finally I saw the huntmaster on his horse — a great roaring black-bearded villain he was, and though I never before laid eyes on him I knew it was the likeness of Grim Dugald, dead in his grave these thirty years and more.’

‘How did you escape?’ you ask breathlessly.

‘By the skin of my teeth! Pushing my cart for all I was worth, I fled up hillock and down gully, careless of

brambles and potholes in my path, and all the time I could hear the blaring of that horn and the horrible hot breath of the headless hounds on my neck. Just as it seemed they must catch me, I waded through a shallow stream and suddenly it was silent. I risked a look back, and there was nothing behind me but moonlight and shadow. Can't cross running water, you see, them demons and like. Now, you'll excuse me if I discuss the matter with a bottle or two.'

He goes past you into the inn. You summon up your courage and set out across the moors.

Turn to **12**

73

Walking on the bridge is more difficult than you had expected. This is because of the uneven coating of fungus and the fact that some of the tiles are tilted at a slight angle. If you have a length of rope then you can rope yourselves together and cross without much danger. If not, then you might prefer to climb down into the moat and get to the manse that way instead.

If you have rope, turn to **108**

If not, will you still use the bridge (turn to **96**) or will you cross over at the bottom of the moat (turn to **85**)?

74

Blowing away the coating of dust, you hold the painting up and pause to reflect on what it would fetch at an auction. Screams of disgust, most probably. If you really are bent on keeping this grotesque memento, remember to record it on somebody's character sheet.

Assuming you have not already done so, you can now go over to the archway at the back of the hall (turn to **51**) or else take a look down in the cellars (turn to **62**)

75

You advance and brandish the garlic in the mirror-demon's face. There is no effect. As it focuses its myopic gaze on you

and scratches its head, you decide to make a hasty retreat before you suffer the same fate as befell your companion(s). You hurry off to explore the cellar.

Turn to **62**

76

The oars fall almost without sound into the opaque waters. You drift out from the quay surrounded by an eerie hush.

You have not been rowing for long when a landing-stage comes in sight. This is also of white stone, like the quay you set out from. It is completely surrounded by water. In the middle you can see a small shrine, like the shrines of pagan times, consisting of a marble dome supported by pillars carved into the shape of human figures. As a tasteless and gruesome embellishment, the figures are depicted bound in shackles, as though being stretched on a rack.

You cannot see clearly into the shrine, except to tell there is something large resting on the altar stone.

If you dock at the landing-stage, turn to **99**

If you row past in search of the far shore of the lake, turn to **111**

77

A host of large white bats drop down out of the darkness. They will fight to the death to prevent you opening the door — proof, if proof you needed, that something of priceless importance lies beyond it.

First BAT: COMBAT 2 BODY 1

Second BAT: COMBAT 2 BODY 1

Third BAT: COMBAT 2 BODY 1

Fourth BAT: COMBAT 2 BODY 1

Fifth BAT: COMBAT 2 BODY 1

There is enough room for every player to get into the fight. There is no point in fleeing; they would just pursue your boat.

Survivors of the fight turn to **100**

78

Grim Dugald falls! The floorboards shake with the impact, which sends clouds of dust into the air.

But is he truly beaten? Can you kill one who has already tasted death? Before your eyes, the strong white fingers twitch and a growl of returning strength rises from his black maw.

Quick! Before he reanimates, you must do something. The desperate struggle has left you too weary to fight on. But what alternative is there?

If you open the door and race off into the night, turn to **67**

If you think you have an item that might dispatch him for good, turn to **124**

79

Perdita lays a hand on your arm. 'This is faerie treasure that Grim Dugald extorted as tribute from the moor-goblins and suchlike,' she cautions. 'If you are greedy and take too much, you're sure to suffer bad luck forevermore. But if you take only a moderate amount and leave the rest for its rightful owners, things will turn out better in the long run.'

If you think that is just so much superstitious nonsense, turn to **91**

If you abide by her folk-wisdom, turn to **102**

80

The fire gives out more smoke than warmth. You sit beside it, rubbing your hands against the evening chill and keeping a wary eye on the trow. After a while, because the fire is burning low, the trow reaches out a hairy hand to his left and picks up a broken branch that you had not noticed lying there before. He tosses this on to the fire. Crackling flames shoot up as the wood catches alight.

This gives off more heat, but eventually the branch burns low and you are forced to huddle closer to the fire. The trow reaches out and touches you, sending a shock through your skin as though you had suddenly found a

large spider crawling on your leg. You look up, startled, but he only stares back with his coal-black eyes and slowly points a gnarled finger off to your left. There, a short distance from the fire, you can see another broken branch. The trow still says nothing, but he seems to want you to fetch the branch.

If you do, turn to **104**

If you stay where you are, turn to **115**

81

Upon hearing you pronounce the words of the spell, the ferocious bats flutter gently to the walls and promptly fall asleep, hanging upside-down with wings folded tightly around them. Turn to **100**

82

You make your way up the hill to the castle. Passing between the shattered pile of stones that was once the gate-tower, you emerge into the courtyard. Grass and clumps of heather poke up between the cracked and tilted flagstones. The walls have tumbled in, and the proud towers have become craggy stacks. Bathed as it is in the cloud-fretted moonlight, the scene strikes you as melancholy and dreamlike. The lineaments of ancient glory...

The unmistakable ring of swordplay startles you out of this reverie. A sudden motion catches your eyes. You turn to see two knights in the middle of the courtyard, smiting at one another with heavy two-handed swords. Both wear armour of a very old style. One has pale trim on his ebon cuirass and wears a light cloak. The other is dressed in a black tabard over a coat of silvery mail. Their faces cannot be seen because of the beast-like visors of their helmets.

If you wish to step forward and interrupt their dispute, turn to **93**

If you quietly return to the path and continue on your way, turn to **69**

83

The dingy tunnel slopes down into the earth. It is only wide enough for you to go in single file. As you advance, a foetid odour rises around you like the stink of some dismal lair. A sense of foreboding jangles your nerves, and the roof of the tunnel gets lower and lower until you have to crouch almost like animals. At intervals roots choke the tunnel and have to be pulled aside, dislodging clods of earth.

Suddenly something brushes across the face of the player in the lead. It is not any mere trickle of soil from the tunnel roof. Terror closes in a cold sweat as your eyes adjust to the darkness and, directly in front of you, you see a clustered group of ghastly barrow dwellers. These emaciated monsters are the animate corpses of ancient chieftains. They breathe gusts of stale air, gladdened by the presence of living souls on whom to feast, and reach for you with eager fingers.

They will fight the first player in the battle order. There is only room for them to fight you one at a time. Because of the cramped conditions here in the tunnel, any player except the dwarf must deduct 2 points from COMBAT.

First BARROW DWELLER: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Second BARROW DWELLER: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Third BARROW DWELLER: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

The confined space also means that spells (apart from FIRE OF WRATH and GENIE) cannot be targeted from behind the first player, and fleeing is out of the question.

Survivors turn to **127**

84

He gapes at you as though you are demented. 'As to that,' he says, 'each path has something to recommend it. The trail down through the bogland is at least shrouded in mist, so you will see few sights to scare the wits out of you. Another track goes past the ruined castle, within whose walls you might conceivably make a stand if pursued by fiends from hell. The last route is a stone road that winds

between the barrows of antiquity; a person of iron nerve might therefore consider it of archaeological interest. Now, out of my way – I have an urgent appointment with a bottle of whiskey.’

He goes past you into the inn. Shrugging, you strike out across the moors.

Turn to **12**

85

You clamber down the sides of the trench into the thick shadows. The bottom of the moat feels slimy underfoot, knotted with weeds. A toad croaks once, unseen in the gloom.

If the dwarf is still with the party, turn to **119**

If the dwarf has been lost on the way here, turn to **129**

86

It strikes you as odd that the books and papers scattered here are not coated in the same thick layer of grime that shrouds everything else in the house. Then you notice a glistening black stain on the end of the quill and, touching it, you find it is wet. You hold your fingers up – could the wetness be dark red ink? Or something else? In the poor light it is impossible to say for sure.

If the wizard is here, turn to **109**

If not, you can now examine the mirror (turn to **97**), return and take a look upstairs (turn to **39**), or descend to the cellars (turn to **62**)

87

You cast the holy water across the face of the mirror. Instantly there is a horrible shriek from the demon, and a hissing of fumes as the water corrodes the magic mirror like acid. This is followed by a sudden crack, and clouded splinters of glass drop out of the frame to break on the floor.

It seems the demon has been well and truly exorcised,

but you have had no success in recovering your lost companion(s). Ah well, there is no sense in wasting time in grief. You all knew the risks before setting out on this venture. Now it is time to see what is down in the cellar.

Remember to cross the holy water off your character sheet, then turn to **62**

88

That was very, very, very stupid. There you are, lying in the cellar of a haunted mansion on the most ghost-ridden night of the year – dead to the world.

You are snoring happily when a hand shakes you awake. You open your eyes. There are lots of hands —leprous white with long dirty talons. The scene swims into bleary focus. None of the hands are attached to bodies.

The ghostly hands fly through the air and seize you. Filled as you are with wine, you can do nothing to fight them off. You give a sob of terror and flail uselessly for a few moments, then fingers clamp on your windpipe and everything goes black.

Perhaps you will be found the next morning on the cellar floor, a cautionary lesson for other would-be heroes.

89

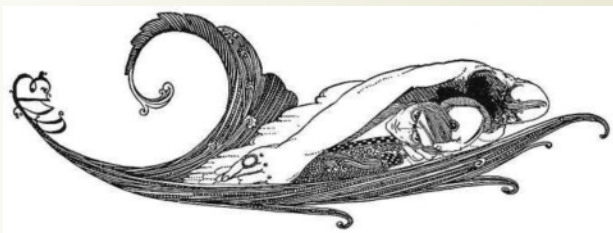
Grim Dugald stands in the gloom of the hall. He has been waiting for you.

His flesh is the colour of candlelight, and other-world energies have swollen his already huge frame until his head almost scrapes the rafters. His eyes roll horribly – two icy pebbles in the mistletoe-bush of his beard and hair – and as he sees you his growl of hate is like the howl of a hanged man.

Do you have an item you want to use?

If so, turn to **112**

Otherwise, turn to **123**



90

You pause for breath. The cold night air feels raw in your lungs, and sweat plasters your hair over your eyes. Through the throb of your own terrified heartbeats, you hear the gushing of water. Looking around, you see a brook — no more than a faint trickle in the bottom of a weed-strewn ditch, but perhaps it will be enough. You mutter a silent prayer.

The hunting-horn sounds again. It is much closer now, but you do not dare look back. You start towards the brook. Your legs feel almost too weak to carry you, either because of exhaustion or mere terror. But somehow you stumble to the ditch and manage to jump across.

The eldritch baying builds to a crescendo, breaks around you like a wave — and then is gone. All is silence.

You look back. The moors are deserted. Sinking back on the turf with a sigh of heartfelt relief, you rest until your limbs stop shaking and then set out for the village.

Turn to **113**

91

You close the lid of the chest and carry it back across the moors. If anything it seems to get heavier with every step, but it is a burden you do not mind bearing — after all, with such wealth as this you will be able to travel in a gilded carriage from now on. As you strain to heft it across hedgerows and ditches, you begin to dream of all the luxuries you will be able to buy: jewelled swords, amulets, silken clothes and fine furs. Why, there are kings on their thrones who command less wealth than you now possess!

At last, reaching the road that leads into the village, you set the chest down to catch your breath. It wouldn't hurt to take one more peek at the treasure. Nobody could really say you were gloating, could they? Heroes do not gloat.

You are fairly tingling with anticipation as you lift the lid. Then your jaw sags and your eyes are frozen in their sockets from sheer dismay — the treasure has gone! In its place, the chest contains nothing but twigs and dead leaves! What trickery is this? You stuff your hands deep into the chest and burrow about, but you cannot find so much as a single copper piece. Slumping to the ground with a groan, you bury your head in your hands and weep.

When you have quite recovered from this unseemly outburst, turn to **113**

92

His sunken face contorts in fury and he leaps up, snatching a smouldering lump of peat from the fire as he does so and hurling this into the face of the first player in the battle order. Before you can collect your wits, the trow has delivered a sly knife-wound to the first player, then bounds off into the mist with the speed of a startled rabbit. Within seconds he is lost to view. It is only now that you realize the eeriest thing about the whole episode: the trow never made the slightest of sounds.

The first player in the battle order has lost one BODY point. There is no help for it, so you may as well proceed — turn to **69**

93

Their sword-strokes are delivered with great ferocity, sending metallic knells reverberating around the ruins. But between each clanging exchange they reel back to rest on their weapons, sucking the air into their lungs with sobs of raw fatigue. It seems they must have been fighting for a long time, and are mortally weary. Their battle has become as much a contest of stamina as of skill.

You move closer. As they become aware of your presence, they move apart and stop fighting. Leaning on their swords, they raise their visors and watch you. Their faces are pale and soaked in sweat, and so alike that they could be brothers.

Who do you want to speak to?

If it is the one in the pale coat, turn to **105**

If the one in the dark coat, turn to **116**

If you step between them and address them both together, turn to **126**

94

No amount of treasure would induce you to enter that yawning grave-mouth in the dead of night! You hurry away across the moors with many a backward glance. Just as you are beginning to shake off your qualms and wonder whether you haven't been just a little timid, you catch sight of something that sends an icy jolt of fear through your veins. Three thin figures appear for a second on the crest of a hill behind you, backlit by moon-washed cloud. You blink and look again, but they seemed to be moving into the deep shadows and now you cannot see them.

If you continue at a brisk but measured pace, turn to **69**

If you abandon dignity and just make a run for it, turn to **106**

95

At first he is reluctant to waste time talking to you, but then he says, 'Ah well, have a look here and see what suits you.'

He whisks the canvas off his cart to display a jumble of items. Most are junk but, sorting through, you find some objects that might come in handy:

A length of rope: costs 5 silver pieces

An oak staff: costs 8 silver pieces

A jar of healing salve: costs 14 silver pieces

A sprig of garlic: costs 1 silver piece

A silver dagger: costs 19 silver pieces

A phial of holy water: costs 7 silver pieces

(The healing salve can be used to restore one lost BODY point; there is enough in the jar for three uses.)

The dwarf should decide what you are buying, if anything, and cross off the appropriate sum. Then, as the pedlar goes to spend his money in the inn, you head out over the barren moor.

Turn to **12**

96

Each player has to roll one dice, trying to score less than or equal to his SPEED score. Anyone who fails this roll plunges off the bridge and falls to his/her doom on the palings in the bottom of the moat. Survivors (if any) should turn to **108**

97

A face swims out of the depths of the mirror, as though rising out of the glaucous murk of a deep pond. It has slitted red eyes, short horns, ears that taper to points, and a grin full of fangs and malevolence.

It peers at the player in front of the mirror as if seeing him in a glass, darkly. You get the feeling that it is not very bright. After a moment's thought it gives a shake of its head, feigning a look of regret that is belied by its sadistic smile. 'No luck for you today, my friend,' it says, waving a taloned finger.

If you are holding a book up to the mirror then the wizard is the person affected. Otherwise it is whoever is first in the battle order. This player vanishes into thin air!

If that player was on his/her own, turn to **130**

Otherwise, turn to **18**

98

Downcast by grief for your lost friend(s), you return to the entrance hall. A glance up the stairs shows you the parade

of rank fiends that is Grim Dugald and his ancestors, each glowering with renewed malevolence from his portrait as though aware of your mourning, and revelling in it. But, no, that is just macabre whimsy. At the top of the stairs, your eyes cannot penetrate the palpable darkness. Your gaze drops. Off to one side, under the stairs, is the door down to the cellar.

If you go up the stairs, turn to **110**

If you descend to the cellar, turn to **62**

If you want to have one last try at rescuing your lost friend(s), turn to **121**

99

Your hairs stand on end as you walk towards the shrine. You do not need any sixth sense to tell this is a place of great wickedness.

Stepping between the pillars, you see a grey stone coffin lying on the altar stone. Unlike the rest of the shrine, the coffin is very crudely worked — and deeply weathered, as if it had been exposed to the elements for years.

Before you can make a move towards the coffin, there is a ghastly bubbling growl and four figures shamble from behind the altar to attack you. They are women, chalk-white of flesh and listless of gaze, whose black hair and robes hang lankly, as though damp.

First UNDEAD BRIDE: COMBAT 3 BODY 1

Second UNDEAD BRIDE: COMBAT 3 BODY 1

Third UNDEAD BRIDE: COMBAT 3 BODY 1

Fourth UNDEAD BRIDE: COMBAT 3 BODY 1

There is enough room in the shrine for all players to get into melee.

Survivors of the battle turn to **42**

If you flee back to the boat, turn to **111**

100

You unlock the door. It opens with a gravid creak to reveal a young girl cowering inside a small bare cell.

'My name is Perdita, and I am from the village a few miles across the moor,' she tells you.

'How do you come to be here?'

'I'm not sure. On my way home I was overtaken by dusk. Since this is Samhain Eve, I quickened my step, but just then I saw a tall shadow of a figure lurking among the trees by the side of the road. I crossed over and hurried by on the other side, but I hadn't gone far before I saw the figure again —somehow ahead of me still. I began to feel very frightened then. I lost sight of the figure as I backed away down the road. Then suddenly I bumped into something large behind me, and I was seized. That's the last I remember.'

Realizing this is no place to hang around, you take Perdita to the boat and row back across the lake. Ascending through the cellar, you emerge into the entrance hall of the manse once more. If you were going to breathe a sigh of relief, however, then it was premature: someone is here waiting for you.

Turn to **89**

101

You try to struggle on, but to no avail. Terror takes all strength from your legs, and you fall in your tracks with an exhausted groan.

The hounds come sweeping down on you in a tide of evil. Their grisly panting covers you in a charnel stench, hot breath rasps your flesh, gory slobber scalds you — and you are too weak with fear even to look up.

As they swirl about you, you hear the whinny of a horse and a short sneering laugh of unutterable cruelty. Huge hands seize you then, and Grim Dugald rides back home with his bag ...

Your adventure ends here.

102

You take just as much treasure as you can fit into your

purse. Then, with Perdita skipping happily on ahead, you return across the moors to the village.

By the time you reach the edge of the moor, the purse has grown noticeably heavier. Unable to restrain your curiosity any longer, you take a peek inside. Instead of the random scatter of gold and silver you filled it with, it now contains nothing less than gleaming platinum and fat sparkling diamonds. You are richer than you could have dreamed!

You close the purse and quicken your pace to catch up with Perdita. There is a merry tune on your lips as you walk into the village and, considering the night's many horrors, a blithe lightness to your step.

Turn to **135**

103

The spell causes the demon-serpent to fall asleep. Its stiff body suddenly goes limp, and it relaxes its jaws enough for the stricken player to shake it off. You are heartily glad to be rid of the thing: you cannot see how you could have completed your quest with a gruesome handicap like that.

Turn to **69**

104

The first player in the battle order gets up and goes to fetch the log. At the same time, the mist closes in even more thickly and for a moment the rest of the party lose sight of their comrade.

A sound rings out. It could be a stifled cry, or the hoot of a night-bird flying above the mist — you cannot be sure. Several seconds pass, and still your comrade does not return. You think this rather odd, since the branch did not seem to be far away. You peer into the bank of fog, but you can see no sign of your friend.

If you wait a little longer for him/her to come back, turn to **2**

If you go looking, turn to **125**



105

The knight gives his name as Herab. Keeping a weather eye on his opponent, whom he tells you is called Oben, he explains the reason for their antagonism.

‘It is a complex matter,’ he says. ‘Both of us were leading units of troops from the garrison. We were ambushed by the battalions of the Witch Lord. Oben, commanding the cavalry, ordered his men to charge, but the Witch Lord’s magic muddled his mind so that he led his men on into the distance in pursuit of a non-existent foe. My own troops were left without support and all but annihilated, while Oben’s force was whittled away by attacks in the forest. Later the two of us returned here to find the castle had been sacked by the Witch Lord’s army, and all of our people slain or carried off as slaves. If Oben had not ordered a reckless charge, the day might have gone differently. I said as much, and so we duel.’

If you have not yet done so, you can now get Oben’s side of the story – turn to **116**

If you wish to address them both, turn to **126**

If you decide it is time you were on your way, turn to **69**

106

You race pell-mell across the moors, scrambling through hedges and leaping over furze bushes and ditches in your path. At last, when you are sure that you have lost your eerie pursuers, you pause for breath beside an old stone wall. Just over the wall is the road that leads up past the ruined castle.

Some say the castle is haunted, but after your hair-raising dash just now you are willing to take your chances. You take a last glance back to check that no-one is behind you, then start to clamber over the wall.

Suddenly three thin figures shoot up in front of you with a mad shriek that makes your hair stand on end. They carry the smell of dankness and mould. They are barrow dwellers, and you must fight for your very lives.

First BARROW DWELLER: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Second BARROW DWELLER: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Third BARROW DWELLER: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Because you have just been running hard, every player must reduce his or her COMBAT score by one point for the first three rounds of the fight.

If you survive (whether by defeating them or by fleeing) you can continue along the road past the castle: turn to **117**

107

No sooner have you hefted the sword than the lid of the sarcophagus gives an indignant rattle and a deep sepulchral voice intones from within: 'If you'll be after keeping that, you'd best leave something in its place.'

If you decide to put the sword back and leave, turn to **69**

If you do as the voice says, turn to **128**

If you dare to raise the sarcophagus lid, turn to **16**

If you make a run for it with the sword, turn to **5**

108

You arrive safely at the porch. A stout iron-bound door blocks your way, with thorn-bushes grown up all over it.

The hinges have rusted only slightly through the long years of neglect, and it does not seem you would have much chance of breaking in. A glance along the walls offers no hope of entry through the windows, either – though the lights have fallen in, the stone bars are too closely-set for anyone to squeeze through. With its moat and strong defences, the place could have been built to withstand a siege. Being a frontier manor-house, you realize, it probably was.

With no way of getting inside, your adventure ends before it has hardly begun. Or is there a way? Experienced adventurers ought to be able to think of something – but don't hold your breath waiting for a clue.

If you really cannot think of anything better, then you can return across the bridge and clamber down into the moat (turn to **85**)

109

You can take a bottle of ink and/or a sheet of blank parchment from among the items on the desk, should you wish. Remember to note them on your character sheet if you do.

The ability to read and write is not common in your medieval world, but naturally the wizard is literate and soon deciphers the faded inscriptions on the books. One thick tome describes itself as *The journal of Dugald of Knochlor*. The early entries date back many decades, and you can hardly bear to read them because they detail acts of shuddering depravity. Then, at a point about thirty years ago, a bizarre change occurs. The writing from here on is written back to front, as though seen in a mirror, and the ink is rusty red-brown. Then you remember. Thirty years ago was when Grim Dugald died.

If you carry the book over to the mirror to read the latest entry, turn to **120**

If you have finished here, you could take a look upstairs (turn to **39**) or go down to the cellar (turn to **62**)

110

You have only gone up a few steps when the creaking of rotted wood convinces you that the upper storey is probably unsafe. You don't mind squaring off against the most bloodthirsty monsters this side of nightmare (well, not much ...) but you draw the line at breaking your neck because of a collapsing floorboard.

As you return to the entrance hall, you again pass Grim Dugald's portrait. It is a strange and enigmatic painting. One of the enigmas surrounding it is how the painter managed to keep from fainting with sheer fright when confronted with that minatory stare for hour upon hour. If you want to take the portrait with you, remember to record it on someone's character sheet.

Now you can return to the arch (turn to **51**), or descend the cellar steps (turn to **62**)

111

Eventually you reach the far side of the lake. Unlike the quay you set out from, this is not a man-made landing-place but a shore of white pebbles. Dragging the boat up on to the beach so that it will not drift off, you commence a search of the area.

Quite soon you find a locked door in the back wall of the cave. It is of stout, bronze-bound oak. Pressing your ear to the door, you can just make out a sound like muffled sobs.

If you have the bronze key and wish to use it, turn to **77**

If not, turn to **66**

112

Which of the following will you try:

A phial of holy water *and* a bottle of wine? (You need to have both items.) Turn to **133**

A phial of holy water on its own? Turn to **10**

A sprig of garlic? Turn to **21**

If you have none of these, or don't think they would be of any use, turn to **123**

113

Did you rescue the milk-maid, Perdita, from Grim Dugald's clutches?

If so, turn to **135**

If Perdita is not with you, turn to **114**

114

You return to the village just as the sun is rising. The villagers unbolt their doors and emerge into the daylight. From their blanched and drawn faces, you suspect that few of them got any sleep during the night.

When they see you have not returned with the missing girl, they give sullen shrugs and return to their daily routine. 'That's typical of these so-called heroes,' you hear someone mutter.

'True,' says another; 'they only stir themselves for the big tasks like saving the world – you know, exploits they consider worthy of their attention.'

'One poor life isn't important enough for the likes of them,' says a third, throwing you a sour glance.

You watch them for a moment or two and then head on your way. But those stinging words will remain to haunt you for years to come.

115

The trow gives a high howl of rage – the first and only sound you hear him utter – and leaps up, kicking red sparks up from the fire. You throw up your arms to avoid getting a hot cinder in your eyes. Smoke billows everywhere, congealing with the mist, and as your coughing subsides you discover that the trow has vanished. You also notice now that the branch he wanted you to fetch actually lies on a patch of quagmire. If you had stepped over to get it, you would most likely have been sucked under to your doom.

Shaken by the experience, you decide to hurry on your way. Turn to **69**

116

Speaking in a curiously antiquated dialect, the knight tells you he is called Oben. 'And my opponent is Herab,' he adds, glowering warily at the other man as he rests on his sword.

'But why are you fighting?'

He gives a deep sigh, exhaling a plume of weary breath into the chill night air. 'I will tell you. Once we were comrades, both commanders of the castle garrison. While on a sortie against barbarian raiders who had been despoiling the region, we were set upon unawares by the regiments of the Witch Lord. I saw one chance for victory — no, not for victory; such a claim is extravagant. A chance for survival. I pushed forward with my cavalry troop towards the enemy command, my plan being to break through and kill the Witch Lord before his forces could rally. It almost worked! I rode close till I saw the Witch Lord among his bannermen, and he was no more than three lances' length from me. Seconds more and I had slain him. But his sorcery struck me, befuddled my wits, so that suddenly it seemed as if he had withdrawn a great distance, and I led my warriors in a futile dash into the woods, where we were easily picked off in ambushes.

'In desolate mood, I returned here to find my friend amid the ruins. The castle had been pillaged and its occupants slain. To my face, Herab blamed me for our defeat. I would not accept such words; a duel to the death was our only recourse.'

If you want Herab's version of events (assuming you have not spoken to him already) turn to **105**

If you now decide to help settle the matter, turn to **126**

If you think it is time you were on your way, turn to **69**

117

You hurry along the road and, turning a bend, catch sight of the ruined castle nestling atop a nearby hill. Your first thought is that it reminds you of a broken and age-blackened skull — but that might be because you are

overwrought. All the same, still shaken by your recent experience, you have every intention of giving the place a wide berth. As you pass by at the bottom of the slope, however, a faint sound is carried down to you on the wind. Surely it was the clash of swordplay? Could someone be fighting up there in the ruined keep?

If you go up to the castle to investigate, turn to **82**

If you have learned your lesson after the burial mound incident, turn to **69**

118

You raise the lid to discover a scowling spriggan crouching inside the ribcage of the tomb's occupant. The spriggan glowers at you, twitching its spines and showing its tiny sharp teeth in a snarl, then suddenly leaps up and rushes for the tunnel.

If you wish, you can try to catch it before it gets away by rolling your SPEED or less on one dice. If more than one player decides to do this, make your rolls according to position in the battle order.

If someone catches it, turn to **50**

If not, turn to **61**

119

You spot a secret tunnel entrance in the wall of the trench. This feature is common in isolated manor houses: an insurance allowing the occupants to escape if the manor should be besieged in time of war. You make your way along the tunnel until it widens out into a flight of stone steps. These bring you up inside the manor, where you emerge via a concealed panel below the main staircase.

Turn to **6**

120

The later entries are at intervals of one year apart —always dated this night, Samhain Eve, when the spirits of the dead are said to walk the earth. The last entry reads:

"Awoke early and watched the daylight drain out of the carcass of the sky. Darkness and cold surround me still. Before cockcrow I must find another with rich full veins and the succulent bloom of life. Another little flower to press dry for my collection; another fruiting body to savour."

This doesn't seem as bad as some of the entries, you think. At least Grim Dugald is developing an interest in horticulture to balance against his less wholesome obsessions.

But wait — something is happening to the mirror...

Turn to **97**

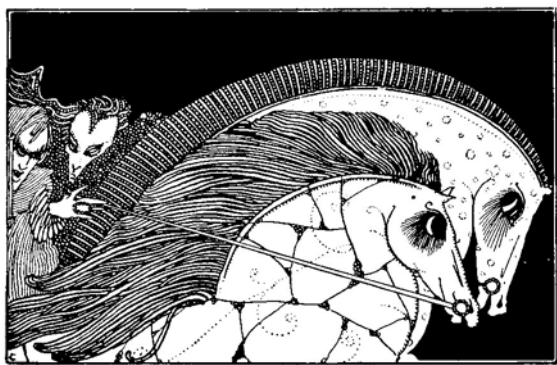
121

Suddenly your blood boils in righteous fury. Why should you meekly submit to that smirking demon's iniquities? You stride angrily back to the study and glare at the mirror where it hangs on the wall. You are resolved: perhaps your comrade(s) cannot be returned — perhaps the demon destroyed them utterly. Perhaps rescue is impossible, but at least you will give it your best shot. Never let it be said that you didn't try!

If you use an item, turn to **131**

If you strike out at the mirror, turn to **52**

If you go boldly up to it and demand that it restores your friend(s), turn to **8**



122

After initial setbacks, it now looks as though you are doing rather well. With your morale considerably improved by your clever circumvention of the demon, you set out to investigate the cellar.

Turn to **62**

123

Do you have the codeword CARFAX written on your character sheets?

If so, turn to **43**

If not, turn to **55**

124

Which item will you use? Do not take too long making up your mind, as already Grim Dugald is returning to life — or rather, to undeath.

If you use a silver dagger, turn to **134**

If you have the sword Wraithreaver, turn to **11**

If you employ an oak staff, turn to **22**

If you try a phial of holy water, turn to **33**

If you don't have any of these, your only recourse is to run for it: turn to **67**

125

You have not got very far from the fire before the mist sweeps back like a curtain, and now you can see your comrade. He/she is sunk to the waist in a sticky quagmire! You rush forward, but you soon see that rescue will not be easy: one wrong step, and another of you could be caught in the bog.

If you want to try using an item, turn to **13**

If you return to the campfire, turn to **24**

126

You advance to stand between the two knights. 'This duel is senseless. You are equally matched, and you might fight

until Doomsday without settling the issue.'

'If that is true—' mutters one darkly.

'—then so long shall we fight,' finishes the other.

Their hard glare into one another's eyes seems to bore right through you as if you were nothing. Their expressions are rigid with relentless enmity. Guided by a tacit signal, they both start to lower their visors, ready now to renew the fray.

'Wait!' you cry, throwing up your arms in protest.

If you try to convince them the duel is unnecessary, turn to **3**

If you take sides in the matter, turn to **14**

127

Edging with horror past the grisly remains of the barrow dwellers, you proceed to the burial chamber. It seems to take for ever to reach it. The ceiling has partially collapsed, though the sarcophagus is still visible. Resting on the lichen-slimed stone lid is a two-handed sword. Instead of steel it is made of a weird glossy blue-green substance, and is all one piece including the hilt.

If anyone takes this sword, decide who is doing so and then turn to **107**

If not, you can open the sarcophagus (turn to **118**) or go back down the tunnel and continue on your way (turn to **69**)

128

Decide which item you will leave in place of the sword and cross this off the character sheet. To your amazement, the item vanishes as soon as you put it on the sarcophagus lid – magic! The aura of eerie menace is growing stronger by the second, but if you are bold enough to raise the lid and peek inside, turn to **16**

If not, you can leave the barrow by turning to **5**

129

You have got just halfway across the bed of the moat when you hear a sound like the last rattle of breath in the throat of a dying man. Suddenly a group of spectral figures rear up from the mud to confront you. You have just a glimpse of their cold dead faces in the moonlight, and then they are upon you. The dreadful wail issuing from their mouths is enough to frighten even the bravest heart.

There is room for everyone to fight. However, before the fighting starts every player must try to roll equal to or under their MIND score on one dice. If you fail, terror roots you to the spot and you must roll a 1 at the start of a round before you can act again.

First BANSHEE: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Second BANSHEE: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Third BANSHEE: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

Fourth BANSHEE: COMBAT 3 BODY 2

There is no point in fleeing; the banshees could easily catch you on the slippery slopes of the moat. If you defeat the banshees, turn to **28**

130

You don't know how it happened. One moment you were staring at the demon that was talking to you out of the mirror, the next you were here. But where *is* 'here'? You look around. Apparently you are in a featureless stone cubicle with no means of egress. Trapped! Beads of sweat start from your brow as a clammy sense of claustrophobia envelops you. Then something cracks under your foot and, peering down to see what it is, you cannot help giving a sudden cry of horror. For the floor of the cubicle is littered with dry flesh and crumbling bones – the mortal remains of others who were trapped here, as you have been, by the demon of the mirror.

You will languish here until you die.

131

Which item will you use:

A phial of holy water?

Turn to **87**

The portrait of Grim Dugald?

Turn to **19**

If you have neither of these, you have no recourse but to abandon your vanished comrade(s). You can explore the cellar by turning to **62**

132

It is already peering at the portrait suspiciously. Although it is obviously both short-sighted and cretinous, you realize it will not stay fooled forever. You cannot risk more than one order. Which will it be?

'Heal everyone's wounds.'

Turn to **9**

'Replenish our magical energy.'

Turn to **20**

'Furnish an enchanted weapon.'

Turn to **31**

133

You look at the bottle you took from the cellar: *Chateau Guignol* – an opaque red wine of unspecified vintage. Rapidly uncorking it, you add a measure of holy water to the contents and then pretend to drink.

Grim Dugald steps closer, each step shaking the floorboards. But he pauses when he sees you taking a swig of wine, and a bestial growl wells up from his inhuman throat. Teeth bared in a mad grin of fury, he thrusts out his hand to take the bottle.

'Aye,' you say, 'if we're to duel, then to the death it is! Let's drink to it, eh?'

His huge hand snatches the bottle and takes a deep draught, draining it all. Then he smashes the bottle into a corner and, wiping the crimson juice out of his beard, strides forward to do battle.

Suddenly he stops, his titanic frame locked rigid. He starts to raise his arms but they seem to weigh him down like blocks of lead. His eyes start from his head, and his veins show grey against the sallow flesh. Then, with a

hideous wail escaping his lips all the while, he slowly fades away like a nightmare at the coming of dawn.

Turn to **32**

134

It is a fallacy to think you always need a wooden stake in situations like this. There was a famous vampiric lord of the Borgo Pass, for instance, who was despatched with a steel knife. Plunging your silver dagger into Dugald's heart, you find that it does the job just as well. He gives a single short grunt, then his lips peel back from his teeth and a long whisper of fetid breath sighs up out of him, and as this happens his mighty frame collapses in on itself, crumbling down to the bones and beyond until nothing is left of him but a pile of grey ash. You leave the dagger embedded in this — just in case.

Turn to **32**

135

You march back into the village in triumph. The sun rises, casting a warm gold light that sparkles on the dew and does much to dispel memories of the appalling experiences of last night.

The villagers unbolt their doors and emerge into the day. On catching sight of you, they raise a cheer and surge forward to surround you. Then you are lifted up on their shoulders and carried to the village square, where they begin a celebratory breakfast in your honour.

The elders of the village try to make you accept a reward, but you know they are poor people and you will have none of it. 'Keep your silver,' you tell them, 'for your thanks are reward enough.'

In any case you know what an adventurer's life is like. A bag of gold and a goblin are always just around the next corner.

Originally published in 1991. Recovered by the Underdogs under the abandoned books principle. Creative Commons License BY-NC-ND.